

# The University of Hull

## The Poetic Oeuvre of ‘Michael Field’: Collaboration, Aestheticism and Desire in the Writings of Katharine Harris Bradley (1846 – 1914) and Edith Emma Cooper (1862 – 1913)

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## **Abbreviations**

*NM: The New Minnesinger* (1875)

*B: Bellerophôn* (1881)

*LA: Long Ago* (1889)

*TM: The Tragic Mary* (1890)

*SS: Sight and Song* (1892)

*UTBa: Underneath the Bough* (1893)

*UTBb: Underneath the Bough, Revised and Decreased* (1893)

*UTBc: Underneath the Bough, American Edition* (1898)

*WH: Wild Honey from Various Thyme* (1908)

*PA: Poems of Adoration* (1912)

*MT: Mystic Trees* (1913)

*WC: Whym Chow: Flame of Love* (1914)

*D: Dedicated* (1914)

*SP: A Selection from the Poems of Michael Field* (1923)

*WD: Works and Days: From the Journal of Michael Field* (1933)

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## Introduction

The last few decades have witnessed an immense resurgence in critical and academic interest in the lives and writings of nineteenth-century women poets, many of whom had been forgotten or ignored for the greater part of the twentieth century. From the 1970s onwards there has been a steady increase of articles, monographs and critical editions which have sought to reclaim and reinstate such seminal figures as Felicia Hemans, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Christina Rossetti and Charlotte Mew. Few would now deny that writers such as Barrett Browning and Rossetti are major figures of Victorian poetry, as integral to the canon as Robert Browning, Swinburne or Tennyson, but for nearly a century, despite their formidable reputation in their own time (both women were considered for the position of Poet Laureate), their work was dismissed as minor, inferior to their male peers, and they were allowed to fall from view. Their recovery ran parallel with the rise of feminist studies in the 1970s, which saw the resurrection and reappraisal of these forgotten, suppressed voices as being central to the intellectual cause.<sup>1</sup> One of the more curious, idiosyncratic voices of women's poetry to re-emerge and take centre stage at the close of the nineteenth century – and to be rediscovered at the *fin de millennium* – was that of 'Michael Field'.

There have been very few poets quite like Michael Field, both at the *fin de siècle*, or, indeed, at any other time. What on the surface appeared quite commonplace was in truth anything but orthodox: not only was Michael Field not male, he was two women, Katharine Bradley and her niece Edith Cooper, which Stevie Smith termed 'that odd amalgam of aunt and niece' (Smith 1981: 181). Following on from the publication of a few early verse dramas, there was a great deal of speculation in literary circles about the emergence of a new poetic presence, a young male poet whose classical learning and accomplishment in blank verse drew comparisons to Shakespeare.<sup>2</sup> The extent of Michael Field's impact (and the effect of

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<sup>1</sup> In 1975 Germaine Greer edited an edition of Rossetti's *Goblin Market* – which, as Tom Paulin states, 'initiated the rediscovery of her poetry' (Paulin 2005: 222) – this was duly followed by Cora Kaplan's major re-issue of Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* in 1978.

<sup>2</sup> In his critical assessment on Michael Field in *Poets and Poetry of the Nineteenth Century* (1893), Lionel Johnson asserted of the verse dramas that: 'Michael Field, at her highest point of excellence, writes with an imagination, an ardour, a magnificence, in degree far lower, in kind not other, than the imagination, the ardour, the magnificence of Shakespeare' (Johnson 1893: 308).

the pseudonym) can be glimpsed in a fascinating letter which Gerard Manley Hopkins wrote to Robert Bridges on Holy Thursday 1885, after hearing that the latter was due to meet the young author, Michael Field, at a forthcoming literary gathering:

I had almost forgotten to say that Michael Field is the author of *Callirrhoe* [sic], *Fair Rosamund*, and other plays one or all published very lately and much praised by the critics. He is a dramatist: nought which concerns the drama concerns not him, he thinks. It might indeed do him good to know that you had never heard of him, but I hope you will not let him make up a trio of enemies (*spretae injuria formae* you know) with Marzials and Hall Caine. [...] M. F. may perhaps be Irish: Field is a common, Michael a very common Irish name. Do be wise.

(Hopkins 1935: 215)

Hopkins's letter reveals the extent to which the fame of Michael Field had spread by 1885, and also that the male name was working. But more importantly, perhaps, the letter reveals the complex political nature of male dominated literary circles. The critics may praise this new writer, 'he' may be an accomplished dramatist – or so 'he thinks' – but he is not to be allowed to get above his station just yet. (It may do him good to know he has yet to impress himself upon the elder literary lions). But then again, Hopkins cautions Bridges against making an enemy of him: united with other young male writers he could become a potentially dangerous element. It is interesting that Hopkins thinks 'him' to be Irish; Michael Field was such a blank canvas that his audience could literally imagine him to be who they pleased. But this strategy had its dangers, as another letter from Hopkins to Bridges a year later on 26 November 1886 illustrates. By this time Hopkins had learnt of the identity which lay behind the male name: 'Sputters of poetry by Michael Field appear now in every week's *Academy*, vastly clever, pointed, and flowing, but serving in the end to shew [sic] Coventry Patmore was right in his opinion of women's poetry'<sup>3</sup> (Hopkins 1935: 245). Hopkins does not hide his admiration of this lyric verse,<sup>4</sup> but he is now able to dismiss it on the grounds of gender. The mysterious, shadowy young man who had embodied the latent threat of an emerging younger generation now awakes no such fear. Michael

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<sup>3</sup> 'A strong and predominantly masculine mind has often much to say, but a very imperfect ability to say it; the predominantly feminine mind can say anything, but has nothing to say' (Patmore 1892: 761).

<sup>4</sup> Most of these poems would later appear in the early poetry collections *Long Ago* (1889) and *Underneath the Bough* (1893). Hopkins did not live to see the publication of these works.

Field's lyric poetry can be read, admired for its cleverness, and then safely disregarded as the work of a 'predominantly feminine mind'.

Hopkins was not unique in his attitude or his reaction. Due to the prejudices against not only women's poetic writing, but collaborative writing in general at the end of the nineteenth century,<sup>5</sup> there was a swift decline in the critical reputation of Michael Field that dogged Bradley and Cooper for the rest of their lives. Coupled with this, there was a general cultural and critical prejudice against British *fin de siècle* literature and Aestheticism which lasted for the majority of the twentieth century. Although once maligned figures such as Oscar Wilde and Aubrey Beardsley made a swift return to the centre stage of 1890s literary and cultural studies – initiated in great part by Holbrook Jackson's early landmark monograph *The 1890s* (1913) – many voices (most of them female) remained silenced. In the 1880s Robert Browning told Bradley and Cooper not to be distracted too much from their vocation by critical hostility or indifference: 'We must remember we are Michael Field. Again he said, "Wait fifty years"' (WD: 20). Browning was not too far out in his prediction. Michael Field did have to wait for critical re-appraisal, but it would take almost a century for critics to become aware of the significance of the body of work and Bradley and Cooper's intriguing position in *fin de siècle* culture.

Bradley and Cooper left behind an astonishing amount of material: there are some twenty-eight plays and nine volumes of verse which they published in their lifetime – some drafted plays and poems emerged posthumously – not to mention the thirty volumes of manuscript journals, and many thousands of letters. A lot of the critical work on Michael Field has focused upon the lyric poetry and the early pagan allegiances of Bradley and Cooper, but more recent study has begun to take into account other aspects of the life and work, beginning to draw upon the wealth of manuscript material which has for so long remained untouched. Each year sees new articles and chapters on Michael Field appear, and 2007 saw the publication of the first monograph to focus solely on their work. Michael Field studies is now firmly an industry in its own right.

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<sup>5</sup> Walter Besant, in an article for *The New Review* entitled 'On Literary Collaboration', stated that in the case of lyric poetry 'We must hear – or think we hear – one voice' (Besant 1892: 205). It would have been hard for many to maintain this pretence in relation to Michael Field once Bradley and Cooper's authorship became known. As a further attack against their literary ambitions, he offers the stinging remark that 'Woman does not create, but she receives, moulds, and develops' (Besant 1892: 209).



I intend this thesis to draw upon the rich body of Michael Field criticism and to offer a major re-evaluation of the entirety of the Michael Field poetic oeuvre, placing it in the context of the life and times of Bradley and Cooper as well as the wider poetic canon by which it was informed, and in turn, anticipated. My study will consider how each individual collection functions both as whole and as a part of a larger thematic and narrative arc, with recurring images, tropes and narrative threads, constituting a body of work which is quite unique in its sense of completeness and the evolution of stock tropes and metaphors. I will here take the opportunity to enlarge upon the biographical and critical contexts of Michael Field before articulating the main rationale of my thesis and how it fits into the current state of Michael Field studies.

### **Biographical Sketch**

The biographical history of Katharine Bradley and Edith Cooper was, like the many verse dramas which they produced, on the grand scale and never without incident. The following sketch is intended to give an outline of the major events of their life and career; certain aspects or episodes which had a significant impact upon the poetry will be further developed at the beginning of each chapter.

Katharine Harris Bradley was born in Birmingham on 27 October 1846 to Charles and Emma Bradley; she had an elder sister, Emma, born eleven years earlier in 1835. Her father was a prosperous figure in the area as a cigar manufacturer and tobacco and snuff merchant. The family lived comfortably and respectably in the Birmingham suburbs, however, below the surface of the Victorian industrial and domestic ideal lay a family which was anything *but* ordinary. Charles Bradley (1810-48), like his father before him, was a radical dissenter and follower of the political and self-styled religious prophet, John ‘Zion’ Ward (1781-1837).<sup>6</sup> When Charles and Emma Harris married on 4 May 1834, they did so without the presence of the Anglican clergy. They effectively married themselves. It was some time before such civil services were made legal, after much lobbying and controversy, in 1836. Emma Donoghue has stated of this act that Charles and Emma’s decision ‘caused pain to

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<sup>6</sup> Ward, as an ardent follower of the visionary Joanna Southcott, even ‘proclaimed himself the Shiloh, the redeemer whom Joanna Southcott had expected to bear before her barren death in 1814’ (Latham 2003: 189).

their parents and many local cousins, but Katherine [sic] was always proud of Charles and Emma for taking such a stand, even if it left her technically illegitimate' (Donoghue 1998: 13).

And yet, despite such an act – and Donoghue's claims – Charles Bradley was not as extreme in his unorthodox religious beliefs as his father, as Jackie Latham notes in her excellent article 'The Bradleys of Birmingham: The Unorthodox Family of "Michael Field"': 'The evidence suggests that the younger [Charles] Bradley was less committed than his father to Ward's amalgam of turgid biblical exegesis and creative etymology' (Latham 2003: 190). Indeed, he would exclaim in a letter against the apocalyptic hocus-pocus of Joanna Southcott and Ward: 'I hate all the *old stuff*, visitations, and all such non-sense with a perfect hatred' (Charles Bradley in Latham 2003: 190). Charles Bradley was clearly a principled and practical man, one capable of adhering to a doctrine but also of adapting it to fit his own personal conceptions. His forthrightness in expressing personal beliefs, and shaping them to suit an individual need, are qualities which his youngest daughter would inherit. Though Katharine Bradley and her niece would reject the religious practices of their parents, their spiritual life, in all its stages, always ran against the grain of orthodoxy.

Following the death of Charles Bradley on 17 February 1848, the young Katharine Bradley was taught at home by her mother and by a range of tutors. Her education was uniquely wide and varied, far beyond that customarily meted out to young women in preparation for domestic existence. On 2 February 1859 the younger Emma Bradley married James Cooper. Two years later Katharine Bradley and her mother joined the Coopers at their home in Kenilworth. On 12 January 1862 Edith Emma Cooper was born, followed just over a year later on 5 March 1863 by another daughter, Amy. This latter pregnancy left Emma an invalid for the rest of her life; Katharine assumed the responsibility for her elder niece's welfare and education at home, filling from almost the very start the role of aunt, teacher and mother.

And yet none of this newly acquired responsibility hampered Katharine Bradley's education or her formative efforts at writing verse. Following the death of her mother on 30 May 1868, Bradley was independent. Just months later, she attended the Collège de France in Paris for the summer, while staying as a guest with the Géroente family. While there she developed an infatuation for the son of the family, Alfred, who was her senior by twenty-five years. Her feelings were

unrequited and permanently frustrated when he died suddenly and inexplicably in his sleep on 11 November.

Back home in England, Katharine Bradley continued the care and education of Edith Cooper, who by this time was showing signs of being a literary prodigy. In 1874 though, Bradley left the family home again to attend Newnham College, Cambridge as one of the first women to be admitted on a specially designed set of courses and lectures though the students were not permitted to take a degree. The following year, 1875, Katharine published her first volume of poetry with Longmans, *The New Minnesinger*, under the pseudonym of 'Arran Leigh'. She began a lengthy correspondence with John Ruskin and joined his 'Guild of St. George'. After a couple of years of his dictatorial manner she became restless; the friendship and correspondence drew to an acrimonious close. Although her relationship with Ruskin proved hostile, she learned a great deal about how to protect herself against patriarchal criticism and control. Like her practical minded father, she was courageous enough, even at this early age, to follow her own path.

While Bradley's poetry collection did not make a huge impact upon the critics, she had, nevertheless, become published. In 1878 the family relocated to Stoke Bishop in Bristol. Edith Cooper, now sixteen and writing with her aunt, joined her in attending the open lectures at Bristol University. It is here that they gleaned their classical education, attended political meetings and Botany classes (which would, in their own way, have a significant impact upon the recurrent floral imagery of their mature poetry). As well as reading Greek and Latin classics, they began to take the paganism of the texts more seriously, indulge in aesthetic trends of dress, and, around this time, to share a bedroom at the home of Cooper's parents. Whether they became physical lovers or not at this time – or at any point in the future – it is clear from their personal letters that their behaviour did sometimes raise eyebrows and cause real tensions within their own family.<sup>7</sup> Lillian Faderman has written at length about the conventions of close female friendships, which were seen as intimate but innocent. However, there was still something which irritated James and Emma Cooper. Whether this was down to their parental authority being challenged, or something deeper, is not clear. But what is plain is that Katharine Bradley and her

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<sup>7</sup> In a letter to Cooper dating from the mid 1880s Bradley asserted her determination to have her niece with her in London, against the wishes of her parents: 'next week I mean to have you; indeed I shall not come home till they send you to fetch me. That will bring parents to their senses. [...] Come to me: it is not natural for us to live apart' (Bradley in Vaddillo 2005: 161).

niece had to fight from very early on for their intellectual independence and for the freedom of their companionship and were often ‘angered by their family’s opposition to their poetic aspirations’ (Vadillo 2005: 161-2). In the 1890s they would write of taking hands and swearing ‘Against the world, to be / Poets and lovers evermore’ (*UTBa*: 79, 5-6). If read as a literal autobiographical statement, this defiant stance ‘against the world’ began in the Bradley/Cooper household in Bristol as early as the late 1870s.

At this time Bradley and Cooper were drafting their early verse dramas and undertook their first forays into collaborative lyric verse. The first major public fruit of this private intellectual and artistic enterprise was *Bellerophon* (1881), a play and a series of lyric poems appended at the end, and published under the pseudonyms of ‘Arran and Isla Leigh’. The adverse critical reaction to the ambiguity of the writers’ gender, the fact of their collaboration and the idiosyncratic use of classical myths and terminology were perhaps the impetus behind the decision to adopt the less ambiguous, more masculine ‘Michael Field’. The name was a composite of the main nicknames which the two women had for each other: Bradley was known as Michael, and Cooper was Field.<sup>8</sup> Therefore the uniting of the two names was a means of drawing the two women and their writing together, as well as hiding the truth of their collaboration and their femininity from the reading public. It is certain that their name, though a practical means of ensuring their work was given fair attention, clearly became something more significant to the two women over the course of the years. Although Michael Field gave Bradley and Cooper a certain degree of shelter and positive publicity while they learned their trade and made important connections, once the cover was blown they did not abandon the name as they had Arran and Isla Leigh. Michael Field is a continuing conceptual experiment, an act in poetic performance to the degree that *he* becomes a real presence in their lives, more of a person – a form of secular trinity – than a literary project. Even many years after the name was known to be a cover – and as Lionel Johnson’s 1893 assessment shows, ‘he’ was commonly referred to as ‘she’ – Bradley and Cooper continued to assert the importance of Michael Field as someone/something separate from themselves, as the following letter to Vernon Lee shows:

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<sup>8</sup> The two women had an astonishing range of names for their friends and particularly each other. Cooper would also be known in private and in the journal as Henry or Hennie and occasionally Pussie or Puss in private letters. Aside from Michael, Bradley was also referred to by Cooper as Sim, short for Simiorg: a mythic bird endowed with reason.

It cannot be too frequently repeated that belief in the unity of M.F. is absolutely necessary. Alike for the advancement of his glory & attaining of his favour. He is in literature one. Where the secret of this chance dualism is not known, the wise & kind preserve it. And every public reference to him should be masculine ... But I need scarcely warn Vernon Lee on this point?

(Bradley and Cooper, 29 January 1890, in Ehnenn 2008: 1)<sup>9</sup>

The publication of *Callirrhoë and Fair Rosamund* in May 1884 brought the fame and appreciation which they both craved; the most prized result was a correspondence with the elderly Robert Browning which quickly blossomed into a close supportive relationship. It is clear from the surviving letters and journal entries that he fulfilled the role of benign male mentor in a manner opposite to the one that Ruskin had played almost a decade earlier. However, the downside was that it was he who inadvertently revealed the truth of their identity and their collaboration. As Hopkins's two letters show, the change in attitude was very swift. Although the best works of Michael Field were yet to come, the peak of 'his' public popularity was already over.

1885 saw the publication of three plays in one volume, *The Father's Tragedy, William Rufus, Loyalty or Love?* It also saw the publication of H. T. Wharton's landmark translation of the whole corpus of the remaining Sapphic fragments, a book which inspired Bradley and Cooper to write a series of lyrics which incorporated these fragments and re-made them into new, complete verses. The work, *Long Ago*, was heavily encouraged and endorsed by Browning. It appeared in 1889, shortly before his death. 1889 also spelt another traumatic loss, that of Bradley's sister and Cooper's mother, Emma Cooper. This event, though intensely traumatic for both women, changed the domestic politics of the Bradley/Cooper household: Cooper was now freer to travel and spend time with her aunt unchecked. The literary connections they forged around this time with Oscar Wilde, Walter Pater and John Miller Gray would prove to be influential and of lasting value.

One of the first major gestures of Bradley and Cooper's new freedom was a series of trips to the continent in 1890 and 1891. The main objective of these journeys was to visit the major Grand Master Renaissance paintings. From this grew the book *Sight and Song*, in 1892. One of the results of their research into Renaissance art and

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<sup>9</sup> In reference to this statement, Vernon Lee would write to her mother: 'I think the page they devote to inculcating the mysteriousness of their dualism is a pathetic instance of the literary worm, which always imagines the eyes of the world fixed upon its precious wriggings' (Lee 1937: 315).

the more esoteric realms of aestheticism had brought them into contact with the young American art critic Bernard Berenson. This was to prove one of the most significant relationships of their lives; his attitude to the visual arts helped to shape their own, but it was the emotional effect which he had upon the two of them which would prove the most enduring legacy. They nicknamed him both 'Doctrine' and 'Faun', highlighting the dual erotic and quasi-religious emotions which he evoked.

Berenson was an attractive, dominating figure in aesthetic circles, but he could prove a very difficult – if not sometimes dangerous – friend to any noteworthy female artist or critic who encroached on his territory. Vernon Lee found this out to her misfortune after he accused her and Clementina Anstruther-Thomson by letter on 24 September 1897 of plagiarising his conversations in their article 'Beauty and Ugliness' for the *Contemporary Review*: 'with your instances, examples & *obiter dicta* I am simply delighted. They are such familiar, cherished friends. [...] How can I sufficiently thank you!' (Berenson, 1965: 55). In reply, Vernon Lee vented her 'disgust and indignation' at a letter she found 'so untenable and so slanderous' (Vernon Lee, 2 September 1897, in Berenson 1965: 56). In a close-knit intellectual and artistic community, the ill-favour of Berenson could prove damaging.

Berenson's friendship with Bradley and Cooper proved an equally mixed blessing of pleasurable intellectual connection and intense emotional combat. Through letters and visits with him on the continent during the early years of the nineties Cooper developed significant romantic feelings for Berenson. Martha Vicinus has recently written convincingly and in depth about this fascinating and complicated relationship in 'Sister Souls: Bernard Berenson and Michael Field' (2005). It is clear that Berenson was aware of Cooper's feelings, and despite his admiration and respect for her, he was more interested in the married American Mary Costelloe who frequently stayed with him in Europe. What resulted was a tension in Cooper where she felt an artistic and loving allegiance to her aunt, but was also drawn to the desiring potentials of Berenson: 'There is no fellowship, no caress, no tight winding together of two natures when my Love is severed from me; and there seems to be no life in people – no life to be got anywhere – if one is withdrawn from the Doctrine so I sit by my table doubly dead.'<sup>10</sup> While Cooper could never bring herself to abandon her aunt for Berenson – and although it is unlikely that her internal

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<sup>10</sup> Field, Michael, BL. Add. MS. 46780, 1892, *fol.* 134r. (Due to their length and for ease of reading, all references to manuscript sources will hereafter be made in footnotes).

drama would have been translated by her into reality – this nevertheless put a real strain upon the relationship behind the Michael Field identity. Berenson was quite happy to go along with this teasing relation with the two women as long as he could use it as a means of antagonising Bradley. Although the relationship would cool and his influence wane for much of the latter half of the nineties, he managed to compromise the solidity of Michael Field, with the two women writing increasingly separately for many years, and with lyric poetry taking second place to the writing of their dramas.

After the collection of lyrics *Underneath the Bough* in 1893, there would be no new volume of lyric poetry published by Michael Field for another fifteen years. Although Bradley and Cooper would write a great number of lyrics towards the end of the nineties – both together and apart – and publish a few plays, the middle period of the decade was one of their most creatively sterile as they reconfigured their personal and artistic allegiances to each other. However, one saving grace from around this time is the long association which these two women formed with the artists Charles Ricketts and Charles Shannon. What they found in this pair was a male relationship which mirrored the romantic and aesthetic aspects of their own. They were first formally introduced by William Rothenstein in January 1894, with Cooper recording in the journal:

The *Vale* is a cul-de-sac, containing three old houses – a muddy retreat from the highway, edged by gardens in which snow-ball trees grow from the soil like wands that are full of sighing. One expects to see dead cats mouldering under them. It is nearly dark. Led by Rothenstein we press up the stairs that are suddenly lighted on the opening of the Studio door by Shannon. He is exactly like one of the comely angels of Della Francesca – the face round, the features round, a smiling sobriety of expression – discreet good news of peace and goodwill in his eyes – a perfect Umbrian Gabriel, who only wants his lily-stem on his shoulder. Ricketts is an un-aurioled, decadent Christ, who talks fluently with a mere rill of voice. One has to be on one's rarest behaviour – for nothing ordinary is expected; and a false tone might be an outrage.

(Edith Cooper in Ricketts 1976: 3)

This entry reveals two interesting things: firstly, that Ricketts and Shannon swiftly assumed divine status within Bradley and Cooper's social and aesthetic hierarchy: they are angelic and Christ-like, spiritual, but at the same time 'decadent', esoterically pagan at heart. Secondly, we can glimpse here within the journal the

transformative powers of the imagination of Bradley and Cooper – all the events of their life are transmuted through the writing process on to the mythic plane. Their inner vision, time and again, filters and re-moulds what they see and experience on the terrestrial plane and transmutes it into the artistic, poetic vision of Michael Field.

This relationship with Ricketts and Shannon – particularly with the former – was to last to the end of their lives and prove one of the major stabilising forces in their approaches to aesthetic matters and the future direction of Michael Field. At the end of the nineties, when Michael Field had been silent for some time, Ricketts re-published one of their earlier plays – *Fair Rosamund* (1897) – and what became known as their ‘Roman Trilogy’: *The World at Auction* (1898), *The Race of Leaves* (1901) and *Julia Domna* (1903). He would also design the covers for almost all their books to the end of their lives. He was a trusted reader of manuscript material whose advice was nearly always followed. What he managed to achieve was to breathe fresh confidence into the poetic enterprise of ‘Michael Field’.

The close of the nineteenth century brought about many changes in the material existence of Bradley and Cooper. In the summer of 1897 James Cooper went missing during a walking tour in Switzerland with his younger daughter, Amy. He was found dead in the autumn. The trauma of these months initiated an intense period of writing for both Bradley and Cooper. Although the emotional suffering from these events was intense, in the long run it proved a new start for their artistic and domestic life. The home in Reigate was now without a patriarch. This role was filled by the gift of a three month old chow puppy which they christened Whym Chow.<sup>11</sup> In 1899 Amy Cooper married the Roman Catholic Dr. John Ryan and moved to Ireland. At the suggestion of Ricketts and Shannon, Bradley and Cooper relocated and made the first home of their own in Richmond. This house at 1, Paragon, Petersham Road in Richmond (dubbed ‘The Paragon’ by Bradley and Cooper) became the centre of a small literary circle made up primarily of young male writers such as Logan Pearsall Smith, William Rothenstein, Laurence Binyon and, most importantly, Thomas Sturge Moore. Also at this time, again at the suggestion of Ricketts, they published two plays anonymously – *Borgia* (1905) and *Queen Mariamne* (1908) – which gained them a degree of critical success. However, this proved a short term enterprise. When they returned to publishing their lyric verse it was always under the old banner of

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<sup>11</sup> The dog was named after the famous mountain climber Edward Whymper (1840-1911), who had volunteered his services in attempting to locate the body of James Cooper in Switzerland.



Michael Field. There was no question of 'him' ever being displaced as the mouth-piece of their poetry.

In 1906 tragedy struck again. On 28 January, their beloved dog Whym Chow died. For almost eight years, as they had become more isolated from the world, the dog had been the centre of their domestic and imaginative lives. He had come to be seen as the literal embodiment of their pagan, Bacchic spirit. His death left a gaping hole which none of their friends with their letters of consolation could fill.<sup>12</sup>

Immediately Bradley and Cooper wrote a series of intense poems to commemorate the now absent third part of what had been a form of secular, pagan trinity. A year later in 1907 Cooper converted to Catholicism, followed just months later by her aunt. Again, this new stage in their life put them in contact with shaping masculine influences, one of the most significant being Father John Gray, the one-time decadent poet and associate of Wilde.

In 1908, after fifteen years of silence as a lyric poet, *Wild Honey from Various Thyme* was published following a request for a book of verse from the publisher T. Fisher Unwin. This book was significant in many ways. It heralded the re-emergence of Michael Field as a writer of poetry, but it also demonstrated the aesthetic and thematic impact of the various life events which had befallen Bradley and Cooper since *Underneath the Bough*. It collects some of their best pagan poetry from the end of the nineties as well as the first flowering of their Christian devotional lyrics and the elegies to the dead Chow.

In 1911 Cooper was diagnosed with cancer of the colon. She refused much medical treatment in order to retain a clarity of thought for her writing. The two women devoted themselves to their writing from this time onwards, growing even more isolated from the outside world, their only main contact being the staunch friendship of Charles Ricketts. Although Cooper's illness and their new religion gave them ample subject matter for poetry, their Catholic allegiances had driven them physically and emotionally apart, much to the pain of Bradley. The effect was mirrored in their work as they wrote almost completely separately from each other. The last two books of poetry which they saw into print, the devotional collections

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<sup>12</sup> Logan Pearsall Smith recalled that although he and his sister 'sat up till four o'clock in the morning to compose a letter which might adequately express her grief, we were all cast off [...] for cold-hearted worldlings' (Pearsall Smith 1936: 92).

*Poems of Adoration* (1912) and *Mystic Trees* (1913) were not written as collaborations: the former was Cooper's work and the latter Bradley's.

While caring for her ill niece, Bradley was diagnosed with breast cancer, but kept this secret from all except her confessor and John Gray. Cooper died on 13 December 1913. In her final months Bradley published two more works by Michael Field: *Dedicated* (1914), which was a selection from Cooper's unpublished manuscripts, and *Whym Chow: Flame of Love* (1914), the poems which the two women had written together after the death of their dog in 1906. The way in which she edited these last two works places a fulfilling, hopeful pagan flourish to the end of the Michael Field oeuvre which takes the enterprise back full circle to where it first started when Bradley and Cooper set out as 'poets and lovers'. Bradley died on 26 September 1914, shortly after the start of the war, and was interred beside her niece at St. Mary Magdalen Cemetery, Mortlake, three days later.

The joint biography of Katharine Bradley and Edith Cooper makes fascinating reading in its own right, and provides ample material for the discussion of numerous aspects of feminine, domestic, artistic and spiritual experience in the late nineteenth century through to the start of the twentieth. However, what I find particularly fascinating, and what I believe is more relevant to the work which the two women produced, is the way that their various experiences, emotional and artistic set-backs, fluctuations in their sexual and emotional feelings and the vicissitudes of their religion are mirrored – or, rather, absorbed, transmuted – in the poetry collections which they produced sporadically throughout their long career from the 1880s to the dawn of the First World War. It is possible for a reading of the Michael Field poetic oeuvre to become too biographical, to the extent that the poems are always seen as direct statements by either or both writers about their love for the other, even to the point that the poems themselves disappear from the discussion completely. It is also possible to go the other way and not consider the individual pieces as fragments of a much larger, more sophisticated and ambiguous canvas of personal, historical and literary history.

A significant factor in the early neglect of Michael Field's poetry was, perhaps, the many small biographical portraits which their friends and associates left behind in letters, journals and memoirs. When one reads through these various sketches en-masse, common themes begin to emerge: the singularity of the two women, the comical nature of their views and their appearance, their differences from

each other, and their awkwardness. The latter is illustrated by many references in the diary and correspondence of Mary Costelloe (later Berenson) who often had the task of playing host to the two women: ‘The Mikes went away last night, and Maud and I began to breathe freely again – literally and metaphorically. Their dread of *draughts* has condemned us to close stuffy rooms, and the monstrous delusions about themselves in which they live have condemned us to the worse stuffiness of hypocrisy’ (Berenson 1983: 64). Despite this and many other instances of frustration, Mary Berenson still felt that ‘after all there’s something rather attractive about them’ (Berenson 1983: 64). This particular attractiveness of their character and spirit is best illustrated by the young male followers who clustered around them in later life. Logan Pearsall Smith (Mary Berenson’s brother) would write of his frequent visits to Bradley and Cooper’s Richmond home in a manner which is both highly engaging and strongly caricatured: ‘One felt at first as if one might almost be taking tea in Cranford; but this was the maddest of illusions. Never in Cranford was heard talk like their talk when once inspiration fell on them’ (Pearsall Smith 1936: 91). He expands lavishly:

Gradually, while Miss Bradley talked of words and chanted fine phrases, the silent and sibylline Miss Cooper would be roused from her dreamy lethargy; and as their voices rose and mingled in a kind of chant, the two quietly attired ladies would seem to undergo the most extraordinary transformations; would resume the aspect and airs of the disinherited princesses, the tragic Muses, the priestesses of Apollo, the Pythonesses upon their tripods, the Bacchic Maenads, they really were, and even – for there were no limits to their imagination, and they were by no means all compact of kindness – of the Sorceresses they sometimes seemed, Weird Sisters, who were about to mount their broomsticks with shrieks of malevolent laughter, and fly up the chimney or out of the window on some unimaginable errand.

(Pearsall Smith 1936: 91-2)

To Pearsall Smith, these two rather eccentric and elderly ladies in their talk and their imaginative exploits take on all the classical, mystical and magical aspects of their written works. They are other-worldly, they are magnificent, but they are not to be taken seriously. Although he laments that their work – their poetry in particular – has been neglected, he is far more expansive and at home when it comes to illustrating their comic strangeness, a particular brand of late nineteenth century kookiness which

was entertaining, nostalgic, but never likely to be taken with a straight face in the 1930s.

What Pearsall Smith's sketch does do, however, which many other memoirs of this kind do not, is to see the two women, though different in outward character, as being one in their 'extraordinary transformation' from respectable ladies into 'Bacchic Maenads'. William Rothenstein stresses the physical differences of the elder and the younger in a way which forms an outward reflection of their personality and their artistic temperament: 'Michael stout, emphatic, splendid, and adventurous in talk; Field wan and wistful, gentler in manner than Michael, but equally eminent in the quick give and take of ideas' (Rothenstein 1933: ix). Charles Ricketts takes up the same manner of depiction, and remains quite emphatic in the stress that he places upon 'the extraordinary rarity in intelligence and intuitive force of Miss Cooper', judging her as perhaps the more interesting and artistically gifted of the two: 'Her refinement, something crystalline and fragile, was patent to strangers, but seen in the background of the more active, vivacious personality of her aunt' (Ricketts 1976: 7-8). The verdict seems to be that Bradley was more earthly, domestic, practical and argumentative, with Cooper more wistful, ethereal, more the typical Romantic image of the suffering poet(ess). Such sketches tend to show the strong affections and grudging, shadowy prejudices of their individual authors (Ricketts in particular became estranged from Bradley shortly before her death). The danger of these memoirs is that they invariably place the value of the written work in a secondary category and put the novelty of the life paramount. The two women who became Michael Field may have been magnificent entertainers, they may have been extraordinary company and fascinating, contrasting personalities, but their work – Michael Field *himself* – threatens to move out of focus.

### **Critical Contexts**

These formative memoirs and biographical sketches had a significant impact upon the early critical and scholarly approaches to Michael Field. (In many ways, the effect can still be felt today). This is due primarily to the fact that some of these memoirs – especially the one by Ricketts – were written to furnish Mary Sturgeon with information for her 1921 biography and critical study, *Michael Field*. Aside from journal and newspaper reviews of separate works, the most significant

assessment of Michael Field during the lifetime of Bradley and Cooper had been by Lionel Johnson in his introduction to excerpts from their work in *The Poets and Poetry of the Century* (1893). He would assert that ‘It is upon her tragedies that Michael Field can most justly rest a claim to distinction’ (Johnson 1893: 395), because the lyrics and sonnets ‘are apt to be too full of bold phrases and struggling thoughts, which cannot contain themselves within their bounds’ (Johnson 1893: 401). Writing nearly a decade after the deaths of Bradley and Cooper, Mary Sturgeon was able to create a more rounded and inclusive overview of the entire corpus of poems and plays in the context of the life. Sturgeon had previously written a short chapter on Michael Field in her *Studies of Contemporary Poets* (1916 & 1920). What she created in *Michael Field* was a biography with a separate critical section which looked at the lyrics and then at the plays. Many of Sturgeon’s commentaries upon the life and the individual works are still cogent today, but there is a tendency at times to read the lyrics as an exercise in biographical self-expression. This proves problematic for her when the platitudes are apparently romantic and shared between two women. Lesbianism was more visible and deviant in the 1920s than in the 1890s, so Sturgeon felt a need to distance herself from this and stress the maternal aspects of this ostensibly romantic relationship. The ambiguous, blurred dichotomy of motherly/romantic feelings that Sturgeon highlights is significant and is traceable from the juvenilia of Arran and Isla Leigh through the Michael Field poetic oeuvre.

The 1930s marked a significant moment in the posthumous life of Michael Field with the publication of a selection from the journals and some letters in 1933 by Bradley and Cooper’s literary executor Thomas Sturge Moore, assisted in the task by his son D. C. Sturge Moore. This work has done more than any other in allowing readers and critics access to the apparently ‘private’ side of Bradley and Cooper’s creative life. The other significant event of this decade was the publication of nine of their lyric poems in W.B. Yeats’s *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse* (1936). Here, work which had been written and published as early as the 1880s was placed alongside works by the Sitwells, T.S. Eliot, and the much younger generation of W. H. Auden, Stephen Spender and Louis MacNeice.

However, despite this generous acknowledgement of Michael Field’s canonicity and modernity, there would fall a shroud of silence over the life and the work which was not fully lifted until the 1980s and 90s. There was an attempt by Ursula Bridge in the late 1960s to write a full-length critical biography, but this

remained unpublished and incomplete on her death in 1971.<sup>13</sup> Lillian Faderman, in her groundbreaking and controversial *Surpassing the Love of Men* (1981), offered a short biographical examination of Michael Field and classified Bradley and Cooper's collaboration as an example of what she termed 'romantic friendship' (Faderman 1985: 16), as opposed to a more recognisably homosexual relationship: 'their own love for each other [...] was not as clear cut as we would see it today' (Faderman 1985: 211). A great deal of work followed this foundation and has set out to claim Michael Field as an exponent of transgressive Sapphic verse, with Bradley and Cooper's literary and romantic relationship being held as a paragon of lesbian creative and emotional unity at the close of the nineteenth century. Chris White's seminal article 'Poets and Lovers Evermore: Interpreting Female Love in the Poetry and Journals of Michael Field' (1990) offered a direct rebuke to Faderman for what she saw as a betrayal of the lesbian/feminist cause for not seeing Bradley and Cooper's relationship, and Michael Field's metaphors, as intrinsically homosexual (White 1990: 203-4). White went on to write two more important works on Michael Field in the 1990s (White 1996a & b) which further explored her interest in the Sapphic/lesbian aspects of the life and the work, focusing more and more upon the actual body of the poetic texts. White's legacy has been two-fold: to open up the suggestive intricacy of the eroticised language of Michael Field as well as forging a strand of criticism which sees the life and the work from an unwaveringly lesbian-feminist perspective. This has yielded many valuable avenues for discussion, but also excluded discussion of other forms of desire in the poetry.

Angela Leighton's chapter on Michael Field in *Victorian Women Poets: Writing Against the Heart* (1992) is the second major milestone in Michael Field criticism after Mary Sturgeon. It is the most sophisticated piece of biographical and literary criticism up to this point in time. Leighton looks at the whole breadth of the poetic oeuvre, using many sources, such as *Works and Days*, which would have been unavailable to Sturgeon. Leighton's primary focus is in presenting Michael Field as a lesbian and strongly pagan poet, but without the same ideological intentions which motivate White's early criticism. Leighton's casual dismissal of the later post-conversion religious lyrics contributed to a collective blind-spot in Michael Field studies which has only very recently been redressed.

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<sup>13</sup> This text of 19 extant chapters still rests unpublished in the Bodleian Library. A fuller explanation of this text and its contents can be seen in Treby (1998: 69 & 124).

Following on from the work of White and Leighton, and R. K. R Thornton and Ian Small's facsimile reprint of *Sight and Song and Underneath the Bough* (1993), the closing years of the nineties saw an influx of criticism. In 1996 came Virginia Blain's excellent essay 'Michael Field: The Two-Headed Nightingale', where she suggested the dangers of accepting the 'myth' of their collaboration as a 'literary model of harmony' expounded by the early biographers and Leighton, and which was so important to Chris White, suggesting that it 'obscures the reality of the conflict in the lives of the women, which is suggested in their poetry and corroborated in their letters' (Blain 1996: 244). This was a new direction which looked beyond received opinion and sought out 'conflicts' within the textual fabric of the verse and the almost volatile fluctuations of Bradley and Cooper's dual career.

Blain had shown that the way forward was to look closely for new avenues in the unpublished papers. 1998 saw two publications which did just this. Emma Donoghue's *We Are Michael Field* – published in the 'Outlines' series by the Absolute Press – sought to reclaim the lives of Bradley and Cooper as a pioneering lesbian template of modern homosexual relationships. Though the relationship is seen as being far from 'harmonious' Donoghue does have a tendency – like her predecessors – to dwell upon the eccentricities of the life at the expense of a more detailed and balanced approach to the life and the writing. She produced a rich life-narrative from the journals, turning up many new facts, but failed to cite any sources: despite many excellent insights, the book remains lacking in its scholarly apparatus.

The other book which emerged in 1998 – and which could never be accused of lacking a scholarly framework – is Ivor C. Treby's exhaustive *The Michael Field Catalogue: A Book of Lists*. Here, Treby presents a series of detailed inventories of all the major holdings of Michael Field manuscripts, as well as lists of all the published and unpublished poems, with an attempt to attribute degrees of authorship in each instance. This book has had a huge impact upon subsequent scholarship and has provided scholars with a greater picture of what exists and where it lies. The truth of the extent of the entire corpus is quite astounding. Many aspects of this present study would not have been possible without the help of this invaluable research tool.

In *Victorian Sappho* (1999), a study of the appropriation of Sapphic myth and text in Victorian poetry, Yopie Prins dedicated a whole chapter to Michael Field's collection *Long Ago* (1889) and sought to look more deeply at the implications of the translation process and the combinations of the Sapphic and Michael Field

‘signatures’. Following this, at the turn of the century, there was a spate of articles which sought to move away from the focus upon Michael Field and Sapphism, and to look more closely at the links with aestheticism and ekphrasis, focusing on the collection *Sight and Song* (1892). Ana Vadillo (2005) sought to question the links with Paterian aestheticism and the appropriation of the visual art object. Jill Ehnenn (2004) and Julia Saville (2005) did not concur with Vadillo’s argument against the influence of Pater, and produced work which considered the gendered and homoroticised aspects of the dual ‘gaze’, as well as the processes of ‘translating’ the visual into the verbal. This work, collectively, changed the direction of Michael Field criticism away from purely gender oriented arguments and onto more writerly territory, which placed Bradley and Cooper at the centre of the key literary and aesthetic debates of their day.

In 2004, Margaret D. Stetz and Mark Samuels Lasner staged the first international conference on ‘Michael Field and Their World’, at the University of Delaware. The papers from this conference were edited by Stetz and Cheryl A. Wilson as *Michael Field and Their World* (2007) by The Rivendale Press. The sheer range of subject matter here demonstrates the new, manifold avenues which have opened (and are continuing to open) in Michael Field studies. There are the essays which focus primarily upon the life and questions of gender and sexuality which barely touch upon the poems, plays or journals, and then there are works which attempt a much more text-centred, non-theoretical approach. The two current points of interest as demonstrated in this collection are the ekphrastic works of *Sight and Song*, and the long-ignored late religious lyrics.

2007 also saw the publication of the first full monograph focusing purely on Michael Field: *‘Michael Field’: Poetry, Aestheticism and the Fin de Siècle*, by Marion Thain. Over the years, since 1998, Thain has written a series of short studies and articles on Michael Field which have moved from a discussion of ‘identity’ to a focus upon the later poetic collections which appeared in the early twentieth century. Her monograph is an attempt to consider the poetic oeuvre sequentially and pay particular attention to the thematic preoccupations with time and history. It is certainly a benchmark work in Michael Field studies which provides an overview of the poetic corpus, but it also points towards future readings which could (and should) incorporate other aspects of the lyric oeuvre, such as the juvenilia published as Arran



and Isla Leigh, which Thain chooses to exclude, as well as the elaborate patterning of stock imagery and tropes which are developed over time.

My critical overview above takes in all of the major developments of recent years, but is not exhaustive. Michael Field criticism is still in its infancy, but it is already an active and diverse ‘field’ in its own right, reflecting the variety and diversity of the life and work of Bradley and Cooper and recent developments in academic study of the nineteenth century, women’s lives, and critical theory. Michael Field has attracted the interest of feminists, theorists, historians, biographers and textual critics. In the future, focus must certainly start to fall upon the journal and the correspondence; there is currently need for a critical edition of the journal and of the entire body of the poetry. However, before this takes place there is room and, indeed, a real need for an in-depth textual and critical assessment of the poetic oeuvre which focuses primarily upon the texts and their intricate structuring and collective functions.

### **Rationale**

What I intend to do in this thesis is to look at the entire poetic oeuvre of Michael Field as structured and published by Bradley and Cooper in their life-time. James Fenton has very recently commented that ‘What a poet does with his work as he goes along, what he holds back or fails to publish, the way he shapes an individual collection – all this can contribute to our sense of his development’ (Fenton 2008: xiii). And it is, I believe, this sense of development – formal and thematic, emotional and spiritual, artistic and intellectual – which runs through each collection of verse and is brought to a conclusion which is Bradley and Cooper’s key triumph in lyric verse. There is a sense of wholeness, completion and resolution when the individual books are read sequentially, as a cohesive whole, which is quite unique and sets the poetic work of Michael Field – as a conceptual experiment in itself – quite apart from any other poetic oeuvre of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, whether male or female-authored.

For my methodology I shall, broadly speaking, be taking a New Historicist approach combined with an aesthetic analysis. I aim to produce a reading of Michael Field’s poetry which places it firmly within the context of the lives of Bradley and Cooper, the *fin de siècle*, as well as the wider British – and at times American –

literary canon. Concurrently, I shall be engaging in textual readings which will seek to open up and illustrate the often intricate and complex function of persona, imagery and form in individual poems, as well as how these separate, self-contained pieces work together as sequences and collections, and therefore create the overall sense of cohesion which the entire body of published poetry exhibits.

Through looking at the poetic oeuvre in its entirety, this thesis will examine the way that the vicissitudes of Bradley and Cooper's collaboration frequently shape and inform not just the style of the poetry, but also become one of its central narrative concerns. Also, by taking each book as a separate stage of development, a form of conceptual experiment, we can see Michael Field engaging gradually with many of the major aspects of aesthetic thought and practice of the late nineteenth century: from sexual representation and Sapphic poetics, through exotic lyricism and paganism, to Catholicism. Through this manner of chronological reading it is also possible to chart the evolving representations of desire in all its manifold possibilities – maternal, romantic, artistic, heterosexual, homosexual, and spiritual – as Michael Field moves from a free, classical pagan outlook to a more (un)orthodox Christian world view. Indeed, it is fascinating to see the way that the major tropes of the poetry used to express maternal feelings, female same-sex desire, male same-sex desire, passion for the male form – as well as various spiritual allegiances – are reworked and transformed from the first collection until the last. Whether Michael Field is a pagan or a Christian, the emotions and desires are still the same below the surface; it is only the appearance of the symbol that is different. When read in sequence, the books in their entirety reveal a narrative which dramatises the struggle between masculine and feminine sexual forces which it takes Bradley and Cooper – and by the same token, Michael Field – a whole lifetime and a whole body of work to bring to a kind of harmonious alignment. All the way through, this lyric poetic narrative is intimately tied up with questions of multiple collaborative voices and the key tropes and symbols of aestheticism.

This manner of reading has not been possible in the past when critics have tended to look at a few poems at most outside the context of the role they perform in their respective collections. Even Marion Thain's recent assessment of the oeuvre is exceedingly selective and partial in the poetic texts it addresses, especially in excluding the two early works of Arran and Isla Leigh. While I agree that, literally speaking, they are not texts belonging to Michael Field, they do nevertheless form an

essential foundation for the key themes and aesthetic style(s) of Michael Field's mature verse, and for this reason I will be opening my study with a chapter dedicated to what I see as the poetic apprenticeship, the juvenilia, of Michael Field. I will also be further testing the boundaries of what is meant by the Michael Field 'poetic oeuvre' by analysing an unpublished collection of prose poems, 'For that Moment Only' (1893-5), written by Bradley and Cooper at the mid-point of their career but which they never published. Although this text is not a part of the public oeuvre by any means, it still proves a fascinating insight into the potential avant-garde directions that the eventual canon could have taken, and is in direct textual and thematic conversation with everything that went before and what was yet to come. Overall, I intend my thesis to provide a redefinition and thorough overview of Michael Field's unique and haunting body of poetry, placing their work in the literary contexts of the *fin de siècle*, as well as considering their firm position within the wider English canon: they were in direct conversation with the past and, at the same time, paving the way for the dawn of modernist high poetics.

The opening chapter will address the formative poetic works of Bradley and Cooper in the years before they adopted the guise of Michael Field: *The New Minnesinger* (1875) published by Bradley as Arran Leigh, and *Bellerophon* (1881) by Bradley and Cooper as Arran and Isla Leigh. Particular focus will be on the function of the ambiguous pseudonyms as well as the aesthetic and thematic concerns of the various poetic voices which emerge in both works, moving from the traditional forms and practices of Victorian women's poetry to an engagement with the classical past. Many of the themes dealt with in these two early collections – the expression of romantic and sexual desire for male and female love objects, femininity, Christianity and the complex relationship between the sexes – will recur constantly in future works.

The second chapter looks at the first book of verse published as Michael Field, *Long Ago* (1889), an attempt to translate the remaining Sapphic fragments into complete poems inspired by H. T. Wharton's 1885 edition. This chapter places this work in the context of Victorian Sapphic poetry, and the ways in which it paved the way for Sapphic modernism, particularly in the work of H.D. It also addresses the complex, shifting layers of authorial and sexual identity, seeking to place this work as the starting point of what can be seen – through the complex shifting and blurring of authorial identity and voices – as a distinctly 'lesbian' Sapphism on the one hand, and

as the continuation of male Sapphic writing (in the manner of writers such as Tennyson and Swinburne) on the other.

Chapter 3 looks at the 1892 collection of lyrics, *Sight and Song*. Michael Field's second volume of verse was a programme of translation of a different kind to *Long Ago*. It was an attempt to render the visual 'poetry' of certain Renaissance Grand Master paintings. This chapter analyses the volume, as well as the journal prose drafts of some of the poems, as ekphrastic works, placing them in the aesthetic theoretical framework of critics such as John Hollander, Jean Hagstrum and James Heffernan. Attention is paid to the ways in which Venus, Sebastian and the Madonna are used as conduits for appropriating and expressing various modes of desire, in the same way that Sappho, her maids, Phaon and Alcaeus were in *Long Ago*. I also explore the biographical context to the production of the collection. The tensions evident in the resulting poems echo the escalating tensions at the heart of the Michael Field collaboration, and have a significant impact upon all subsequent poetical works.

The fourth chapter deals with *Underneath the Bough* (1893). This book, like the previous two, is another conceptual experiment which forms an attempt to emulate the song books of the Elizabethan lyricists such as Thomas Campion, John Dowland, and William Byrd. Because of the nature of this tradition, with the emergence of various different personae and multiple voices, the fracturing of the Michael Field voice as the two women wrote increasingly separately enriches the enterprise and has, by the same token, tended to go unnoticed. Attention is paid to all four Books, but particular importance is placed upon the Third Book, which contains a sequence of erotic love lyrics from an elder to a younger woman. This work as a whole is placed in the aesthetic context of its Elizabethan Renaissance influences. The chapter also represents the first critical attempt to analyse the changes which the book underwent in its two reprints in late 1893 and 1897 and the aesthetic and biographical impulses which so seismically changed this amorphous volume of verses.

Chapter 5 represents a departure from the sequence of the published poetic oeuvre to look at the surprising and enigmatic small collection of manuscript prose poems, 'For That Moment Only'. Between 1893 and 1895 Bradley and Cooper devised and composed two series of prose poems which they left in manuscript. As they stand, the texts are complete pieces, having gone through significant revisions. This chapter analyses this brief sequence, looking at what this form offered at this

period which lyric verse did not. The prose poems are placed in the context of Michael Field's other works, as well as the prose poetry which other writers, such as Baudelaire, Oscar Wilde, Olive Schreiner and Ernest Dowson, as well as more recent practitioners such as Samuel Beckett, were composing. These works offer a unique and important insight into Michael Field's middle period of poetic development.

Chapter 6 assesses Michael Field's fourth collection, *Wild Honey from Various Thyme* (1908), Bradley and Cooper's first book of original lyric verse in fifteen years. The interest of this volume lies in the way that it is structured into a narrative, showing the fluctuations of the love between Bradley and Cooper, the tragic loss and mourning of Cooper's father James, and the conversion of the two women from Paganism to Roman Catholicism in 1906. This chapter explores how the Michael Field voice again unites, creating a series of small sequences which dramatise the shift from the spiritual, romantic and literary allegiances of the past, moving from classical paganism to something more Christian, domestic, and divine.

The final chapter looks at the last two volumes of lyric verse by Michael Field published while both Bradley and Cooper were still alive, *Poems of Adoration* (1912) and *Mystic Trees* (1913). Both are collections of devotional verse, the former wholly by Cooper, the latter by Bradley. The chapter addresses the two differing religious and aesthetic approaches of the two women, and the ways in which Catholicism affected Michael Field's late poetic style in general. Although the two women were now writing in isolation, they were still using the unifying cover of Michael Field. This attempt at continued unity can be seen even more through an analysis of the ways in which Bradley appropriates the imagery of Cooper, in a metaphorical winding of her own voice around the other's. This chapter will also seek to place Michael Field's Catholicism in the context of the time, as well as looking at the connection with the baroque poetics of the Metaphysical poets.

The conclusion will look briefly at the two works which Bradley published under the name of Michael Field in 1914 shortly before her own death: *Whym Chow: Flame of Love*, and *Dedicated*, and will consider the ways in which her actions put a final, harmonious twist upon the narrative and spiritual journey of the poetic oeuvre. It will also look at the ways that the Michael Field voice can be traced at points in women's poetry well into the twentieth century.

My focus throughout the thesis will be upon the texts of the Michael Field poetic canon which were published during the lifetimes of Bradley and Cooper, as

well as the manuscript of 'For That Moment Only'. Marion Thain has stated that the journals are due for extensive attention (Thain 2007b: 20), but that does not form a part of my intentions here. I will be drawing upon the journal, but not as a work in its own right, except when it plays a significant role in the drafting of the poems, such as the ekphrastic works or the prose poems. I have made the decision to use both the published and manuscript versions of the journal. Where a specific quotation has been published in the Sturge Moore edition – and has become a characteristic part of Michael Field criticism – I have used this source. I have also drawn upon previously unpublished letters held in the Michael Field collections of the British Library and the Bodleian Library in order to elucidate certain aspects of composition, or to illustrate specific attitudes to the current literary project which Bradley and Cooper were working on, such as Bradley's letters to John Miller Gray about the re-casting of *Underneath the Bough*, and Cooper's letter where she explains her attitudes to prose composition.

In focusing upon Michael Field's poetic oeuvre I have chosen to do so at the exclusion of the verse dramas. To draw adequate comparison between the published plays and the poems in the context of this thesis would detract from the sharp focus which I wish to place upon the poetic oeuvre. There is perhaps a great deal that can be said in the future about the thematic and aesthetic cross-over between the poems and the plays, but before that is attempted, I believe it is important to further a greater understanding of the structure and significance of the poetic collections, both in their own right and how they work together sequentially. In comparison to the voluminous corpus of plays, which is rather diffuse in its development of theme and imagery, the poetic oeuvre is a deftly honed and precise creation: its thematic and aesthetic progression is more visible and traceable – and much more entertaining – as it unfolds over a course of nearly four decades.

The naming and gendering of Michael Field/Bradley and Cooper – in criticism and biography – has a complex history and is one of the most slippery, daunting aspects of dealing with their ambiguous, shifting, and multiple identities. Early critics such as Lionel Johnson and Mary Sturgeon refer to Michael Field as 'she', drawing attention all the time to the reality of Bradley and Cooper behind the public poetic construction. Sometimes they have been referred to as 'the Michael Fields', or simply 'Field'. Both these instances are problematic in the way that they – in the first case – emphasise the duality of Michael Field when Bradley and Cooper

expressly did not wish this, and in the second case of just using the final name, it severs the identity. As Thain states, Michael Field is ‘a bipartite name [...] two names of two women authors’ (Thain 2007b: 4-5), with Michael being Bradley, and Field referring solely to Cooper. I shall therefore use the full name throughout, except when talking about the two very different voices in the two late devotional works when the two writers have divided. When talking about biographical matters I shall refer to ‘Bradley and Cooper’, when discussing the writing, I shall use ‘Michael Field’. I will not, however, refer to ‘him’, but use the more unorthodox, and plural ‘they’ – as is common practice – as this keeps in mind the composite nature of this name: Katharine Bradley, Edith Cooper, and Michael Field were not the separate entities they sometimes thought they were or wished to be.

Bradley’s first name has also elicited a great deal of confusion, speculation and variation over the years, with critics unsure whether to spell it Katharine, or Katherine. Bradley herself used both spellings. I will be going with the former practice which she apparently preferred, and which has been used by Mary Sturgeon, and lately by Ivor Treby and Marion Thain. Where I cite critics who use the *e* spelling, I will silently incorporate their preference without editorial interference.

Perhaps the most complex aspect of writing about Michael Field’s work is the sexuality of Bradley and Cooper. As in the case of Faderman and Chris White, this has become a hotly contested topic. In some quarters, a reading of Michael Field which considers Bradley and Cooper as anything but lesbians is seen as a form of obscuration of the facts. While Bradley and Cooper did develop significant romantic and sexual feelings for men through their lives, there is no evidence that any of these went beyond the imaginary stage. Though there is little material evidence of sexual activity between the two women, it is still clear that their relationship was the most significant of both their lives, and provided them with all the comforts, jealousies, pleasures and pains of a heterosexual couple. While I accept the term ‘lesbian’ to describe their domestic union, it is important to remember that the range of desires they experienced, and which they projected into their poetry as Arran and Isla Leigh or Michael Field, transcended the boundaries of hetero, homo, or even bisexuality. If Bradley and Cooper were indeed lesbian women in a modern sense, Michael Field is certainly not a lesbian poet, or at least, not exclusively so. It is the sheer variety of desiring voices and desiring – and desired – bodies within the works of Bradley and Cooper which I will explore and illustrate throughout this study. I intend this thesis to

show how the poetic cycle of Michael Field represents one of the most complete, satisfying and inclusive explorations of the full spectrum of human desire – refracted through the prisms of aestheticism and collaboration – both at the *fin de siècle* and within the wider literary canon.



## **Chapter 1. Becoming Michael Field: ‘Arran & Isla Leigh’**

After sending John Ruskin a copy of her first collection of poetry, *The New Minnesinger* (1875), Katharine Bradley received the following reply in January 1876:

You would not laugh at my not having read your book if you knew  
– as I hope you will soon know – how much too serious my life is  
to be spent in reading poetry (unless prophetic). But I did  
accidentally open the *Minnesinger* and liked a bit or two of it –  
and I don’t think I threw it into the waste-paper basket. . . .  
(Ruskin in *WD*: 147)

Ruskin’s appreciation is comically grudging, but for the young Bradley the meaning was all too serious and very plain. As a woman writer – particularly as a female poet – she was not to be taken seriously by the male literary establishment. Ruskin’s note of indifferent dismissal would later be amplified by the increasingly hostile reviewers of Michael Field’s plays and lyrics. This early encounter with the patriarchal literary elite was a foreshadowing of the many difficulties and frustrations to come.

But even at this early stage Bradley would eventually prove more than worthy of the challenge which Ruskin’s prejudicial criticisms presented. Newly enrolled as one of the first female students at Newnham College, and an earnest member of Ruskin’s own ‘Guild of St. George’, she was eager to make her name in literary circles. No matter how disturbing the criticism of Ruskin could be she would never consider letting her own independent poetic voice fall into silence.

*The New Minnesinger* was presented to the world under the pseudonym of Arran Leigh. This name was almost certainly an attempt to align herself with the feminist hero of Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s 1857 epic novel in verse, the eponymous Aurora Leigh.<sup>14</sup> Bradley’s gender is alluded to, while at the same time feminine authorship is somewhat obscured under the cover of a masculine sounding name. *The New Minnesinger* garnered a small number of reviews, but failed to make a remarkable impact on either critics or readers.

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<sup>14</sup> Holly A. Laird has noted that although the name Arran Leigh is ‘reminiscent’ of Barrett Browning’s heroine, it is also ‘simply “Kath-*aran* Brad-*ley*’s” own name with the initial syllables lopped off’ (Laird 2003: 197). This strange, ambiguous name therefore gives the young author the safety of an apparently masculine pseudonym, while at the same time aligning her with an archetype of the independent female poetess and still retaining the essence of her own identity.

Over the course of the next six years Bradley was increasingly absorbed with the welfare and education of her young niece. During the six year period between 1875 and 1881, the two women lived together at the home of Cooper's parents, studied together, shared a bed, and began to write together. When the family relocated from Stoke Bishop in Bristol, Cooper was by now 16 and both women took the opportunity of attending the open lectures at Bristol University College.

The fruit of this classical education and their new collaborative writing practice was to be *Bellerophôn* (1881). The book was not well received, partly as a result of the material itself, but also because it was a collaborative work. As a result, Bradley and Cooper published their next work under the more masculine and solitary name of 'Michael Field'. Throughout all of the future fluctuations of their collaborative practice and their private life together, this was the name under which the two women would always face the world, whether together, or apart.

This formative stage in the life and career of Michael Field – the production of the juvenilia by 'Arran' and 'Isla Leigh' – has so far elicited little critical commentary. I believe it to be essential to an understanding of the later direction of their works. In their different formal and thematic ways, *The New Minnesinger* and *Bellerophôn* both hint at the latent potential which the two women had – as individuals and as a couple – which would come to fruition in their mature poetry of the nineties and beyond. These two books, both alone and together, show all of the major preoccupations of Michael Field's verse in embryonic form: concerns of motherhood, femininity and the poetic craft, the projection and voicing of romantic desires; and the conflict between sceptical Christian belief and a pagan/classical sensibility.

This opening chapter will look in depth at these two collections in turn, paying close attention to thematic structure, form, literary context and the projected identity of the author(s). The two women poets who united as Michael Field had, in their formative stages at least, much in common with the formal and thematic conventions of Victorian women's poetry. But they were also able, partly through their unity, but also as a result of their social, intellectual and sexual freedom, to transcend these origins and pursue a career trajectory which was not open for many of their female contemporaries.

**Katharine Bradley, 'Arran Leigh' and *The New Minnesinger* (1875)**

When *The New Minnesinger* appeared, Bradley was enjoying the educational and social benefits of studying at Newnham College, Cambridge. The poems themselves are not always experimental, relying as they often do on traditional and popular stanza forms, although the voices within them quite often fly in the face of convention. They are by turns forthright, sceptical, and playful with a dissenting feminist inflection. Perhaps the most valuable aspect of the book is that it contains a skeletal thematic blueprint of the Michael Field poetic oeuvre.

In the case of the most prominent theme, love, the collection exhibits an interesting duality of desire projected from the lyric 'I' to the object(s) of devotion. While some of the poems are ostensibly written about and to Edith Cooper, there are instances where the apostrophised addressee can be identified as male. Therefore, not only is Bradley using her poetry at this early stage to express her ambiguous, romantic and erotic desires both for her niece and what appears to be a dead, male would-be lover, but she is using a male guise, 'Arran Leigh', to voice these desires in the public sphere. A book of apparently conventional poems is at once made problematic by the ambiguous gender of the writer, carrying, as it does, the divided emotional allegiances of a young woman posing as a man and transcending gendered and sexual boundaries.

The problematic nature of romantic desire in these poems is illustrated in the opening sonnet, 'To E. C.':

My deep need of thy love, its mast'ring power,  
I scarce can fathom, thou wilt never know;  
My lighter passions into rhythm may glow;  
This is forever voiceless. Could the flower  
Open its petall'd thought, and praise the dower  
Of sunlight, or the fresh gift of the dew,  
The bounteous air that daily round it blew,  
Blessing unweariedly in sun and shower,  
Methinks would miss its praises: so I drink  
My life of thee: and put to poet's use  
Whatever crosses it of strange or fair.  
Thou hast fore-fashioned all I do and think:  
And to my seeming it were words' abuse  
To boast a wealth of which I am the heir.  
(NM: vii)

This is certainly an astonishing piece for Bradley with which to launch her debut collection and, indeed, her career as a writer. In the first two lines, the speaker declares a ‘deep need’ of the addressee’s love, asserting that its power can never be fathomed or quantified in terms of language, and must remain ‘forever voiceless’. It is possible for the ‘lighter passions’, the surface customs and emotions of affection to be put into poetry, but the deeper undercurrents of passion are literally unspeakable. To speak of this love is even ‘words’ abuse’; the flower praises its state most effectively through blossoming than by any other means. In the second half of the opening octet, the speaker contemplates the flower, drawing parallels between their kindred states as desired and desiring bodies: the flower draws life from the sunlight, the dew and the air which daily blows around it, much in the same way that the speaker drinks their life of the addressee.

The opening of the flower’s ‘petall’d thought’ in the centre of the poem is echoed by the almost organic flowering of form, thought and emotion as the speaker moves from ideas of inexpressiveness to end on a note of romantic and poetic abundance. On the surface, this is a technically accomplished poem. It certainly has an intensity and idiom which are quite its own, but it is also firmly within the genre of the courtly love sonnet, displaying its many allegiances (and considerable debts) to Petrarch, Shakespeare, Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Christina Rossetti. However, beneath the surface, this apparently conventional lyric is anything but simplistic in the desire which it voices and celebrates. The title suggests that the poem is addressed to Edith Cooper, although the abbreviation hides the gender and the age of the addressee for the readers who would not have known of her existence. The use of the name ‘Arran Leigh’ would also have hidden the fact that this was a love poem from an elder woman to a considerably younger one. At the time of publication, Cooper was thirteen years old. This poem would probably have been seen by friends and family as an effusive, yet nonetheless straight-forward outpouring of feminine feeling from an aunt to her niece. Virginia Blain has commented that ‘the innocence of such an expression of love to a young niece was no doubt a presumption to be counted on at that stage’ (Blain 1996: 249). In reality, what the poem subversively opens is a linguistic and imaginative space where deep-hidden, shadowy passions – the very roots of desire and poetic creativity – can be glimpsed and naturalised, rendered as essential as air. Furthermore, it is a presumption to assume that the poem is addressed to Edith when E. C. were also the initials of Bradley’s sister Emma

Cooper. This further blurs and enriches the lines of desire where maternal, sisterly and romantic desires are all deeply intertwined. This intricate web of parental, sisterly and passionate feeling will run right through the Michael Field poetic canon.

There is, however, running parallel to the poems addressing female love-objects in *The New Minnesinger* – which are by turns playfully erotic, connected to nature and the impetus to write poetry – a separate, more elegiac lyric strand which addresses a dead lover. These occur at intervals throughout the collection, but are mainly to be found in the sequence near the opening of the collection entitled ‘Youth Time’. These love poems are markedly different in tone from the opening sonnet ‘To E.C.’, and deal with a different, more masculine muse. In the autumn/winter of 1868-9 Bradley, aged twenty-two, had stayed at the house of the G rente family in Paris while she attended the Coll ge de France. She was a guest of the half-English daughter of the house, whose brother, Alfred, a forty-seven year old widower, was living with his parents and siblings. It was not long before Bradley had begun to develop and cultivate the possibility of a romantic friendship between them. Given her age, inexperience and the fact that there is no evidence that her feelings were reciprocated, it is possible to see this relationship as a juvenile crush, where the young Bradley was desperately seeking the emotional drama and romantic affection which she had never experienced, and which would give her own poetic works a much needed foundation in reality. This subjective subject matter presented itself on 13 November 1869, when Alfred G rente suddenly and inexplicably died in his sleep. Writing in her diary, Bradley was able to give full creative vent to her feelings:

Oh how beautiful that noble head looked in the calm of death. Not one touch of baseness or littleness; calm strong manhood in perfect repose. There were none of the ghostly English accessories. The [indecipherable word] head looked almost grateful, as it lay on the pillow, the look of untroubled sleep almost made me tremble.<sup>15</sup>

Only hours after his death, and even in prose, Bradley’s writing takes on a rhythmic, wistful lyricism. This passage, replete with strong assonantal inflections upon the soft, elongated *o* and *e* sounds, and the chiming internal rhyme of ‘grateful’ and ‘tremble’ – bringing in ideas of both satisfaction and disquietude – is halfway to being verse. Already, words such as ‘noble’, ‘ghostly’ and ‘beautiful’ become

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<sup>15</sup> Field, Michael. BL. Add. MS. 46776, 1868-9, fol. 23v

synonymous with the dead Alfred and his 'strong manhood'. Now that the male object of desire, with his attractively strong yet disquietingly unfamiliar masculinity is distanced through death, all grief and affection for him can be idealised, heightened, even rhapsodised upon. Days after the death Bradley would further write: 'But I am sure he did care for me. Miss Gèrente tells me he seemed at most to love me, before I came, feeling what I sh.d be to her [...] he had deep special loves.'<sup>16</sup> This would escalate over the coming months; she would come to see him as 'So wholly god-like. I think in Shakespeare he was the most like the Duke Orsino: and I am Viola.'<sup>17</sup> All culminates in the impassioned New Year note: 'Last Year I lost my Darling; yes, even last year, though not two months ago, Alfred Gèrente entered the unseen world.'<sup>18</sup>

From this moment on in the juvenile journal, interspersed between these prose declarations of a young love cruelly cut short, poems about Alfred begin to occur. It is these which later appear in *The New Minnesinger* and prove an interesting emotional counterpoint to the more lively, tenderly erotic love poems which evoke the youthful Cooper. The section 'Youth Time' is a series of lyrics, each addressed to the spirit of the departed lover, which opens with the following poem:

Yes, I sing thee my English songs, my Love,  
 Thou canst listen their music now;  
 Thou wert born in a far distant land, my Love,  
 And all dumbly thou woo'dst and didst win me, my Love  
 Didst win me I know not how;  
 For our hearts had but mystic 'trothal, my Love,  
 And were plighted without a vow.

Thy mother, she sang English songlets, my Love,  
 To the boy on her cradling knee;  
 And now thou art gone to her home above  
 (As we know but one language to those we love)  
 She may speak the old tongue to thee:  
 And the trick of the sweet mother speech, my Love  
 It may mind thee in heaven of me.

(NM: 14)

As with the opening sonnet, this poem is concerned with the idea of the language of love. In the former case of 'To E.C.', there are two types of language: the surface,

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid, fol. 28v – r

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, fol. 44r

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, fol. 48v

expressible platitudes, and the undercurrents of a more primal, verbally inexpressible passion. In this case, death has removed all of the barriers of age, social custom and the restraints of language differences between the speaker and the addressee. Looking down from heaven, Alfred can hear and appreciate the songs of love which he once ‘dumbly’ inspired. Death may have separated them physically, but at the same time it has opened up the channels for a linguistic – though essentially imaginative – intercourse which would have been socially difficult in the extreme on the earthly plane. The most interesting revelation in this poem is that the apostrophised love object is gendered male in the closing stanza. Bradley is already turning convention around by assuming the active elegiac poise; but presenting this work publicly as the writing of one man to another further blurs the traditional lines of projected desire. It is possible that Bradley never thought through the implications of the gendered author upon an interpretation of the gender of the speakers when she adopted her pseudonym.

The seven short ‘songs’ which follow this opening sonnet are variations upon the theme of love denied fulfilment by the intervention of death. The voice which arises from these pieces is controlled, plaintive and at times touching:

They lov’d thee dear, they mourn’d thee dead;  
 Time flies and they forget:  
 To me no pitying word was said;  
 I had no right one tear to shed,  
 And I remember yet!

The happy ones thou lov’dst so well  
 Thy memory have forgot;  
 But I, brief friend, who scarce can tell,  
 Or if thou lov’dst, or lov’dst me well,  
 Lo, I forget thee not.

(NM: 15, 1-10)

The voice which arises here is commonplace enough amongst the pages of English elegiac poetry. But the most important factor in these poems is not their technical originality, but how the young Bradley is able to turn her personal experiences and resultant emotions into crafted lyrical utterance. The succeeding pieces, in slightly differing stanza formations, are variations on this same, simple theme of love thwarted by fate but kept alive by memory. By the end of the short sequence though,

there is a shift in tone towards a more passionate plea to encounter – both visually and physically – the spirit of the departed lover:

Spirit, thou wand'rest,  
But tell me where?  
My thoughts are waiting,  
My love is there

Or, if thou fearest  
The veil to break,  
Some subtler path to  
My spirit take.

[....]

Let me but feel thee  
About my heart;  
Let us not linger  
A life apart!

(NM: 24, 33-40 & 49-52)

These lines, where the speaker longs to see the departed one, to 'feel' the lost presence 'Lest Faith, heart-broken, / Become despair!' (NM: 26), are a textual ghosting of similar sentiments which can be found in poem 'XCIII' from Tennyson's *In Memoriam A. H. H.* (1850):

I shall not see thee. Dare I say  
No spirit ever break the band  
That stays him from the native land  
When first he walked when claspt in clay?

[....]

Descend, and touch, and enter; hear  
The wish too strong for words to name;  
That in this blindness of the frame  
My ghost may feel that thine is near.

(Tennyson 1969: 944, 1-4 & 13-16)

While not as arresting as Tennyson's form and imagery, Bradley's poem nevertheless captures its mood of anguished mourning. *In Memoriam*, published twenty-five years before in 1850 had set the tone and manner for high Victorianism's poetic expression of grief: effusive, heavily emotional, yet tempered with stoicism and a sense of emerging self-discovery through suffering. In this linguistic culture of mourning,



heavily suffused with the language of desire, issues of loss, suffering, sexuality and thwarted passion endlessly collide and intersect as they circle and probe the physical void left by the death of the apostrophised object of desire. Within this tradition it was perfectly acceptable for the male Tennyson to write in this way of his dead friend, Arthur Henry Hallam, with little suspicion of sexual transgression. In like manner, Bradley published these poems as a man, with the male pronoun left in.

Although grief and longing reverberate through these poems to Alfred Gérente, their poetic expression follows a familiar and accepted pattern. What he presented to the young Bradley was a potential love which had been snatched away, allowing for the luxury of endless tantalising conjecture. Her love for Gérente was perfect fuel for poetic speculation because it did not last long enough to become corrupted or threatening. Writing in her diary in 1894, Bradley commented on what she termed ‘His November 11<sup>th</sup>’:

Twenty-six years ago Alfred Gérente died: I have been looking at the old journals. Goodness, what a sentimental girl I was. It is marvellous God suffers such creatures to continue.

How diffuse, + boring, + ridiculous youth is! And yet the passion of those days, in the midst of all this folly, was perfectly genuine.<sup>19</sup>

Beneath the embarrassment here at her younger self the fact remains that she still continued to remember Alfred and mark his death each year. Although her youthful desire for him – along with her grief at his loss – was certainly heightened through her imagination, it nevertheless had an intensity which was very real and impacted positively upon her apprenticeship as a poet. At a formative age when she was completely inexperienced, Alfred Gérente provided Bradley with the basis for a poetic voice which, although not wholly original, was undoubtedly genuine, and well on the way to becoming her own.

And yet, despite the heartfelt platitudes delivered to the absent male lover, the love poems in *The New Minnesinger* which carry the most power and originality are those which deal with love as a vibrant, creative force which remains, refreshingly, very much alive. These works are arguably inspired largely by the young Cooper; they re-open the capacity to love, connecting with the lover/muse figure through the unifying, erotic capacity of nature. In ‘The Evening Primrose’, a solitary speaker

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<sup>19</sup> Field, Michael. BL. Add. MS. 46782, 1894, fol. 133r

wanders into the garden at the end of a hot day; sitting by the June flowers which are now closed, the speaker notices the presence of the evening primrose which is opening its petals to the stars and the night air: 'She parteth her golden petals, / For joy of the first lone star; / And a blest communion seeketh / With the silent and the far' (NM: 61, 25-8). Whilst sitting in the twilight, the speaker draws parallels between this solitary flower, offering itself up to the night, and his/her female muse figure:

Oh, like to the evening primrose  
Is this quiet muse of mine!  
She keeps close-shut from the sunlight,  
But lo, with the day's decline,

She opens her paly blossoms  
To the solemn evening skies;  
And glad, as 'neath lover's glances,  
'Neath the deepening heaven lies.  
(NM: 61-2, 29-36)

The simile is straightforward: both flower and muse are wary of the crowd and need silence and solitude in order to realise their desires. And yet the sexual undertones – the opening of blossoms to the night sky, personified as a lover – are unavoidable and barely hidden below the surface of the poem's imagery. This is a love which allows the speaker to connect desire with infinite poetic creativity and boundless erotic possibility. The love object here is fully alive, regenerative, and safely outside in the cool air, away from the restrictive conventions of the drawing-room and the arid atmosphere of Victorian married life. What this poem tentatively offers is the refutation of a commonplace domesticated love in favour of something more liberating, creative and charged with exotic possibilities. This evening primrose, like the speaker's female muse, will not be born, like Thomas Gray's flower in the *Elegy*, to 'waste its sweetness on the desert air' (Gray 1966: 39, 56), but will flourish in the company of the stars, and any other like-spirited twilight wanderer fortunate enough to be in the close proximity of its seductive, wordless 'converse'.

There are definitely two loves which emerge within the poems of *The New Minnesinger*, one for a man (safely dead) and the other for a female muse figure who vibrantly unites the speaker with nature, sensuality, and the poetic impulse. For a collection which is purported to be by a male writer, there is a strong bias in the love poems towards the feminine, not just as a focal point of desire, but as a spiritual and

intellectual state of grace. Indeed, there are poems which are overtly feminist in tone and render the male pseudonym even more problematic when considered in relation to what the poems actually propose. The most overtly feminist work is the one which gives the collection its distinctive name, 'The New Minnesinger'. Here, the speaker makes it his/her task to explore not merely the wider social implications of the woman question, but specifically the relation of the woman poet to her craft: the subtle and very serious links between her gender, what she writes, and how she writes it:

O Woman, all too long by thee  
 Love's praises have been heard;  
 But thou to swell the minstrelsy  
 Hast brought no wealthening word.  
 Thou who its sweetest sweet canst tell  
 Heart-trained to the tongue,  
 Hast listened to its music well  
 But never led the song!

[...]

Yes, Woman, she whose life doth lie  
 In virgin haunts of poesie, –  
 How have men woven into creeds  
 The unrecorded life she leads!  
 What she hath been to them, oh, well  
 The whole sweet legend they can tell;  
 But what she to herself may be  
 They see not, or but dream they see.  
 (NM: 1-3, 1-8 & 29-36)

The poem, which runs to two hundred and seventy lines, is the most outspoken feminist statement of the collection. It links into what Isobel Armstrong has called 'an overt sexual politics [that] addresses the institutions and customs which burden women' (Armstrong 1993: 319). Structurally, it is divided into a short twenty eight line introduction – written in quatrains – and the remainder which consists of ten lengthy stanzas in rhyming couplets. In the introduction, the speaker poses the question as to why women, who receive so many of love's praises both in verse and in real life, have never actually taken the active role in professing love and exploring their experience of it in the medium of poetry. To Anne Finch in the sixteenth century the answer was because 'the dull manage of a servile house / Is held by some our utmost art and use' (Finch 1928: 24, 19-20). The question is certainly an engaging

and perennial one, as many of the female poets who inspired Bradley in the present and the far past— in particular Barrett Browning and Sappho – actually had taken this precise imperative. Growing out of a Victorian tradition where women were voracious producers of poetry, particularly in the hectic publishing market of popular journals and annuals of light verse, the question is not so much why women don't take up the pen, but rather, why they are curiously silent on matters so keenly important to their own lives and so central to their own experiences? Part of the answer becomes apparent in the opening of the second stanza: it is men who have created the way in which the supposed inner life of women is projected through literature. When writing of their own experiences of love or of femininity, the woman poet has to cut through the heavy poetic brocade woven around them by male poets who 'see not, or but dream they see' what the woman is to herself. The man may be able to represent what the woman is to him, but this does not indicate privileged insight or the authority to speak of the female other, and what results is but a partial, jaded, or completely wrong version of the truth of womanhood. What Bradley's speaker calls for is the advent of a new female 'Minnesinger' – literally singer of love – to voice the experiences of women first-hand, to record not only the monumental aspects of life, but the mundane, ephemeral moments, occurring away from the gaze of men, which, at best, they would ignore: 'Ah, would she but to us rehearse / Her first girl-life in April verse – / A fairer spring-tide would be ours / Than e'er across the woodland flowers' (NM: 4, 67-70).

Both this poem and Bradley's pseudonym allude quite overtly to Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* (1857). This epic poem/novel in blank-verse seeks to provide the feminine voice and experience which Bradley is still calling for in 1875. In Book Two, when the young Aurora decides to choose her vocation as a writer over the proposal of marriage from her cousin Romney, his voice forces itself into the narrative flow, asserting the common prejudices against women's verse, thus embodying the patriarchal critical refrain which was forever nagging at the ears of the woman writer when she sat before the empty page:

Therefore, this same world,  
Uncomprehended by you, must remain  
Uninfluenced by you. – Women as you are,  
Mere women, personal and passionate,  
You give us doting mothers, and perfect wives,  
Sublime Madonnas, and enduring saints!

We get no Christ from you, – and verily  
We shall not get a poet, in my mind.  
(Barrett Browning 1978: 81, 218-225)

In Barrett Browning's poem, Aurora does prove herself as a writer, but initially, and for a long time, at the cost of her own romantic fulfilment, ultimately ending up as the wife of her one-time critic. For Bradley, the true worth of a woman's potential as a poet lies not in what she can express in either the same or a better way than a man, but what she can bring into expression which he could never do. Although women may provide the objective models for Madonnas and Saints, only they can give the authentic voice of motherhood:

O Woman, can she e'er complain  
Of straiten'd lot in song's domain,  
Having as dower of highest good  
The whole wide realm of motherhood?  
Having on human souls a claim  
That through all ages is the same:  
No newer love can thrust aside,  
No sad soul-wand'ring e'er divide.  
From the first promise and the pain  
Her children ever hers remain;  
Most hers, when children's children show  
How far the sacred fire can glow,  
And lips, new-bath'd in mother's bliss,  
Return the primal lover's kiss.  
(*NM*: 10-11, 197-210)

The message is plain: women hold the originality they require within them. It is innate, instinctual, and universal. Mary Maynard has shown how Victorian feminist writing argued for a greater acceptance of the contribution of women: 'it was women's special qualities as women which were to be emphasized, sometimes to the point of asserting the moral superiority of women over men' (Maynard 1989: 235). This is what Bradley's – and Arran Leigh's – speaker is doing in this poem, finding a language to sing of the 'sacred', 'primal' bond between mother and child would place the woman poet outside of patriarchal critical jurisdiction, utilising a lexicon for a poetical space of their own: 'How high soe'er her thought may reach / Still it must flow through woman's speech / In woman's fashion' (*NM*: 12-13, 249-51). The sentiments, although shared with many of Bradley's contemporaries, are here given a forceful simplicity and sharp feminist slant which flies directly in the face of the real

and imagined restrictions of the controlling masculine voice. At times, 'The New Minnesinger' wanders into cloudy obscurity, but at the moments when Bradley is most polemic she is able to achieve a clarity of diction which is arresting and pointedly radical. However, the irony here is that the poem is presented as the work of a man. This is reflected in the use of the third-person voice to speak of the woman writer: a feminine 'I' uttering these sentiments would have been far more pungent, but would also have garnered much adverse – maybe even hostile – criticism, as Ruskin's reaction to the volume illustrates. For all its good intentions, whatever is achieved in this poem as regards the clarion call to women writers to find their own 'woman's speech' is somewhat tempered by the sense that this is indeed written and spoken (perhaps) by a man.

Bradley does put her own advice into practice by making motherhood one of her central themes. At the heart of the book is a series of short lyrics which deal with motherhood, or more specifically, the tribulations of motherhood cut short by the death of the infant. Bradley herself was aware of the delicacy of motherhood from her own mother's death in her late teens, and the illness of her sister which left her as the chief carer of Cooper. Although she would never have children, Bradley was to return to the theme of mothers again and again, often through the figures of Sappho and the Virgin Mary, but also from her own personal experiences, even stating with authority to Louie Ellis: 'I speak as a mother; mothers of some sort we must all become' (Bradley in Sturgeon 1921: 75). In a literal sense, Bradley was never a mother, but on the other hand she was a mother figure to Cooper. As will become apparent later in the work of Michael Field, motherhood is a potential source of spiritual refreshment and plenitude for women; but counter to this it is also a source of fear, potential grief and barrenness. It is in exploring these latter sentiments that the young Bradley chiefly concerns herself:

The wind it may roar in the forest,  
And stir up the stormy deep,  
If it do not cry round the cradle,  
Where my little one lies asleep.

The rain it may beat on the casement,  
If it do not grow too wild,  
To trouble the angel laughter  
From the dreaming brow of my child.

The wind it may wail in the woodland,  
And sob to the singing wave,  
If it do not scatter the daisies  
From their home on my little one's grave.

The rain it may trickle down softly  
To make green the grassy nest;  
So it wake not the weeping sleeper  
So far from her mother's breast.

(*NM*: 31-2)

In 'The Wind', Bradley creates a lyric which in style and emotional intensity is purely Wordsworthian. Led to believe that the speaker is talking about a living child which she invokes the wind not to rouse, the reader is suddenly confronted at the end of the third stanza with the shock that the child is actually dead. The 'cradle', where the little one rests, is actually the grave; the sleep the un-rousable slumber of death. Although the child is dead, the euphemistic language which the mother uses keeps it forever alive, reposing eternally in the possibility of reawakening. The object of motherly affection may have been irrevocably removed, but the sentiments of that sacred love do not die so easily in the heart of the mother, keeping both feeling and child perpetually alive. Here, nature may be the protector of the dead in the 'grassy nest' of earth, but it also has the power, to the mother's mind at least, of being able to disturb, even to touch the child's body. The image of the rain trickling down through the grave is a half macabre, half tender touch which takes the reader imaginatively down into the earth while at the same time serving to heighten the mother's sense of anxiety for her lost child's peace. This mother is only half reconciled to the death of her child, and remains deeply sensitive to the once living body. The soul is not spoken of in this poem; it is as though both soul and body are still complete in the grave, sleeping soundly as though still safely at home.

The poems which best treat of the theme of bereaved motherhood are those which adopt the mother's voice – which can become militant – as in a piece such as 'Unregenerate?' Here, the mother of a dead illegitimate child comforts the spirit of the baby by promising a reunion, despite the widely-held belief that illegitimate children would not be allowed access to Heaven:

Go little pilgrim pure and white,  
Seek thou the heavenly gate;  
I have not read my God aright,

If long thou there must wait.

Nay, he and I must strangers be,  
If, for His pity's sake,  
My little orphan'd Purity  
He will not stoop to take.  
(NM: 50, 5-12)

The spiritual bond between mother and child is unbreakable. Death cannot sever it, and even God is not free from the censure of the mother should the promise of reunion with her child prove to be a false hope on the grounds of illegitimacy. This poem, with its scarcely veiled threat to the Almighty, foreshadows much of the religious questioning and scepticism which dominates the closing pages of the collection. Ultimately, however, if the theme of motherhood allows the female poet to connect with and sing her own unique experiences in a special language of her own, what can result is an experience more often scarred with tragedy and blighted by grief than anything else. The special language of motherhood is a lexicon which chastens as much as it consoles and enlightens, raising more uncomfortable questions than it is able to offer answers.

The section of devotional poems which ends the collection constitutes almost a third of the entire volume. On the surface, the poems in *The New Minnesinger* do – in a sense – follow the conventions of the time for women poets, which Margaret Reynolds has succinctly described as being ‘pious, flowery, sentimental and sweet’ (Leighton and Reynolds 1995: 305). Yet when the reader approaches the religious poems, she/he is confronted with something quite against the grain of the common fashion for women’s religious poetry. To an audience familiar with the pieties of Dora Greenwell, Adelaide Ann Proctor, and also Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Bradley produces a voice full of the willingness to believe, while at the same time being perplexed with doubt and provoked by the continuous strains produced by the demand for blind faith. While Bradley was writing within a specific tradition, and although she was a Christian herself at this time and a member of the Guild of St George, the childhood influence of her radically dissenting parents provided her with a scepticism towards orthodox belief which she would never entirely lose. Her ability to challenge openly what was essentially a patriarchal orthodoxy fuels these early devotional poems, yet it is always tempered – even strengthened – by a playful, mocking sensibility. This final section, far from being thematically and aesthetically



dry, is a fascinating exploration of belief and the slow unfolding and flowering of a self-reliant unbelief.

In the poem 'Steadfastness', Bradley employs a strong, hymn-like tone to explore the continued faithfulness of God, despite the spiritual infidelity of the speaker:

Steadfast to me, my God,  
Steadfast to me;  
O that life's paths I trod  
Steadfast to Thee!

Changeless thy loving face,  
Still seeking mine;  
O that my eyes had grace  
Ne'er to shun thine!

(*NM*: 115, 1-8)

Following the cadences of the popular hymn, and containing the common religious sentiments of supplication and subordination to the almighty, 'Steadfastness' is an admission and recognition of the innate sinfulness and infidelity of the spiritual self, and a request for understanding and pardon. However, subversively, it is perhaps possible to detect more than a sense of irony behind the increasingly overblown imagery and rhetoric:

Lo, to thy cross I come,  
Tears blind the way,  
And at thine anguish dumb  
Mutely I pray.

Low-bowed, my shamed head  
Turns now to see  
Eyes whose full purpose shed  
Pardon on me.

Lift with thy pierced hands,  
Lift me e'en now;  
Draw me with human bands,  
Thou, only Thou.

(*NM*: 116-7, 25-36)

The speaker is willing to prostrate her or himself, literally, before Christ in recognition of his sacrifice and the faithfulness of a steadfast God, providing that he is physically manifest, as if in proof of his existence, to actually 'Draw me with

human bands'. It is not enough to expect a terrestrial being to believe blindly, one also needs occasionally to 'see' and 'feel' this being; it is only the tactile qualities of religion which ultimately bolster belief and quell internal doubts.

This idea is expanded in the poem 'The Fourth Watch'. This piece deals with the moment in the Gospel of Saint John where Christ demonstrates his Divinity to his disciples by walking across the Sea of Galilee where they drift in an impending storm. In the first stanza, the disciples are shown struggling against the rising turbulence of the storm, while in the second stanza, the collective voice of the disciples blends with the singular utterance of the speaker to offer up a direct plea for guidance. This plea is at once literal and figurative, asking for help in the rough waters of Galilee as well as the fraught seas of personal spiritual doubt:

It is now dark; Lord Jesus, shall we doubt  
Right on to steer,  
Though for a few brief furlongs left without  
Thy guidance clear?  
It is now dark, and therefore Thou art nigh;  
Full steadfast we  
Bear on, as under the controlling eye  
We cannot see.

(*NM*: 119, 1-8)

Again, for belief to be maintained – in this case, that of the drifting disciples and the spiritually adrift speaker – it is vital that there is some response, some guiding light from the divine which can prevent the individual from going off-track or foundering. The poem ends: 'the darkness is our plea / For perfect trust' (*NM*: 119, 23-4). In order that the plea of darkness be answered, there must be the light of the possibility of salvation, and the legitimacy of Christian belief.

Aside from the challenge repeatedly posed against Christianity, the most interesting aspect of this poem and the ones which succeed it is the increasing fluidity of form which Bradley exhibits. Almost all of the other poems in the collection which have been discussed so far are, to a greater or lesser extent, written in the conventional forms of the time. Yet religion and religious scepticism open up within Bradley an opportunity to stretch herself not only theologically but also aesthetically in ways that none of her female contemporaries were doing. Dora Greenwell, poet, theologian, and perhaps one of the most devout writers of her age – although, as Emma Mason has mentioned, it is difficult to place where exactly she sits in relation

to Anglicanism, Catholicism, and other denominations (Mason 2006: 55) – saw it as the duty of the poet to raise awareness of Christian morality in society through joining faith with poetry. And yet, she felt that religion and poetry were two contradictory powers, the former orthodox and acceptable, and the latter more sensual, even pagan in its tendencies: ‘I do feel sometimes painfully, a contradiction between the brokenness of Christ and the clear perfection of Art. The glory of the Terrestrial is one, and the glory of the Celestial is another, and these stars differ’ (Greenwell in Mason 2006: 49). Bradley feels no such straining of allegiance when exploring religious belief in verse. For her, tension rested not between belief and form, but within belief itself, and it was poetry which provided an outlet for these feelings as well as allowing her to reconcile herself gradually with a freer, less patriarchal, more earthy belief system. Indeed, there are short poems which occur that deal with the pagan forces of nature:

I cannot tell what weal or woe  
 The coming year may bring;  
 To me it is enough to know  
 The birds will wake and sing;  
 And the simple flowers of long ago  
 About my pathway spring.  
 (NM: 125, 1-6)

More comfort can be found in nature, ‘the flowers of long ago’, than in doctrine because it is more immediately powerful, it is more physically present and visibly demonstrates life, death and renewal each year.

The *coup de grace* as far as religion is concerned is delivered in the final poem in the collection, the immense ‘Trompetenruf’. This piece imagines the chaos which will ensue on the day of judgement, when the trumpet sounds and all people, of all ages in history, emerge from their graves. The speaker gleefully imagines the coming together of modern day man and his far from socially distinguished ancestors: ‘The brain-budding beasts of the ages of Stone, / Who ate, and who drank, and bequeathed useful bone, – / Ah, how will they neighbour? What wise will God blend / The first sketches of man with his consummate end?’ (NM: 164, 9-12). Very playfully, the speaker presents the awkward encounter of man in his various different stages of development, while at the same time questioning the logic of God, or rather,

organised religion. Taking doctrine literally, this is precisely the chaos which would ensue. There is also a very direct critique of the notion of soul-sleep:

But, confusion apart, it is odd God should keep  
The dead of His love in long-centuried sleep:  
No deep inner life-stir is granted to these;  
They're not as live, winter-burgeoning trees;  
But, stripped of the body, the soul is put by, –  
All things come in useful, – meanwhile let it lie. . . .  
(*NM*: 165, 33-8)

Here, as Angela Leighton has commented, 'the poem brings an evolutionary perspective to the contemporary theological debate about soul-sleep [...] The sheer scope of evolutionary history, here, threatens to make nonsense of Christianity's small, rather local homecoming of the saved soul' (Leighton 1992: 206). In rhyming couplets which recall Pope – both in their style and the sharpness of their satire, though lacking his polish – along with a jaunty, reckless rhythm Bradley launches her theological scepticism directly at God: 'O turn to us then / The face Thou hast turned to the children of men!' (*NM*: 174, 195-6). Given such force of expression and bravery to question orthodoxy so openly, it is now easy to see what prompted Ruskin's reticence over this collection.

All in all, *The New Minnesinger* can fairly be termed a collection which does have its share of technical faults and shortcomings, exhibiting a certain juvenile effusiveness, but which nonetheless manages to strike, on more than one occasion, the right notes. The collection did elicit indifferent reviews, but nothing overtly hostile. An anonymous reviewer in an 1875 edition of *The Academy* wrote: 'These simple songs are full of tender feeling and healthy thought. They are not very deep or full, nor have they sufficient inherent vigorousness to enable their author, in any probability, to win a name among English poets; but they are sweet and pure verses which it must have given him great pleasure to write, and of which he has no need to be ashamed' (Anon. 1875: 9). This review highlights the presence of the acceptable hallmarks of women's poetry: 'simple'; 'tender'; 'healthy'; 'sweet' and 'pure'. The author of the poems is described as male, but nothing in the reviewer's account of the poems would suggest that he interprets this work as being by a male writer, or at least of a quality acceptable for a man. It is possible that the reviewer had doubts about the gender identity of the author and muted his (or possibly her) response accordingly.

Although ‘Arran Leigh’ allowed Bradley to achieve some positive notice from reviewers, the name nonetheless diluted the impact of the poems’ quite daring content. What was seen as a promising work for a young woman, was deemed mediocre at best for a man of any age.

### **‘Poems’ from *Bellerophôn* (1881)**

Given Bradley’s increasingly confident manner and ability to challenge patriarchal powers, it is not surprising therefore that Ruskin’s prickly criticism of her work would ultimately provoke a spectacular rebellion. After enduring Ruskin’s advice on what to read, what to wear, and how to deal with her own private finances, as well as how to improve her handwriting, it is possible to see Bradley dropping occasional remarks into her letters to see how far she could test the limits of his patience: ‘My Dear Katherine, ... I am anxious and surprised at your having “given up music sorrowfully”– What for? I don’t understand what you say of your hands either – how are they “almost messengers of Satan”? And I *should* like you to give up dreaming, and writing verses as far as you possibly can’ (Ruskin in *WD*: 154). But such skirmishes in the correspondence are minor in comparison to the reaction which was unleashed by Bradley’s declaration that she had ‘lost God and found a Skye Terrier’ (*WD*: 155):

I say to you, I don’t care how much pain you are in – but that you should be such a fool as coolly to write to me that you had ceased to believe in God – and had found some comfort in a dog – *this is deadly*. And of course I have at once to put you out of the St. George Guild – which *primarily* refuses atheists – not because they are wicked but because they are fools.

(Ruskin in *WD*: 157-8)

Initially, Bradley was at pains to appease Ruskin. But this was now impossible. This skirmish shows that by the end of 1877, some two years after the doubts expressed in *The New Minnesinger*, Bradley had dispensed with the intangible faith for an absent God in return for the more tactile and immediate satisfactions found in nature, as embodied by the figure of the domestic dog. This is a significant exchange, an ironic reversal of God for a dog, which will again become significant later in the life of

Bradley and the career of Michael Field, when, as Angela Leighton states, ‘by a neat reversal, the dog was exchanged for God’ (Leighton and Reynolds 1995: 488).

However, if the Christian God could be exchanged for another object of worship, then so could that other, more concrete and immediately threatening god, John Ruskin. Their correspondence continued, with Bradley receiving her last letter from him some time in 1880, with his declaration in the final line: ‘few whom I have ever cared for at all – have been so little worthy’ (Ruskin in *WD*: 168). Bradley’s spiritual allegiance to the man had waned to the extent that she was no longer wounded by his criticism in the way that she had been just three years before. Knowing Ruskin and letting him into the secrets of her literary ambitions had proved to be a hard apprenticeship. By 1880 she was much stronger and more intellectually independent, but it was a freedom earned through adversity.

Also, by this time, Bradley had been able to replace the need for adulation and encouragement from a man like Ruskin with that which she now received from – and, in turn, gave back to – her young niece. At university College Bristol the classics had been one of their chief sources of interest. In this manner, they received a full classical education, which their predecessors and many of their contemporaries were denied. In her excellent study, *Victorian Women Writers and the Classics* (2006), Isobel Hurst has noted:

The question of a classical literary training is related to social status for women as well as men: those who learnt Latin and Greek were usually the daughters or sisters of educated men. Potential classical scholars needed to own copies of grammar books and ancient texts, or borrow them from male relatives, and a significant investment of time was required for an attempt to study those texts in the original languages.

(Hurst 2006: 53)

It is true that Bradley and Cooper depended upon the economic freedom which their background as the children of a wealthy industrial family allowed them. But they did not grow up in a domestic setting with male siblings from whom they could learn the classics at second-hand. They were, however, able to purchase and possess their own copies of the classics, and attend lectures in person. What resulted was not only a classical education which would put Bradley and Cooper on a par with many of their male peers, but it also had the advantage of being for private and leisure purposes. Therefore they did not experience the laborious rituals which young male pupils

endured in learning Latin and Greek, which could more often than not have a negative effect: '[Women who studied classics] had one advantage over those who found the excessive repetition and grammatical analysis in the classroom dull and sickening: they did not experience the kind of alienation from classical literature described by [Lord] Byron, but could "feel", "relish", and "love" poetry' (Hurst 2006: 12).

If nothing else at this time, Bradley and Cooper certainly did feel, relish, and love poetry. Out of their readings of the classics developed a pagan *jouissance* which permeated their whole world outlook and replaced the rather stuffy, archaic and demanding Anglicanism which had been in its death-throes for Bradley since the mid-seventies. It has been speculated that by this time the two of them were enjoying the closeness of a physical and romantic relationship (Donoghue 1998: 29), but coupled with this, and arguably more importantly, they were now writing together. Not only were they joining their talents together to write drama, they were coupling their own poetic voices to create lyric poetry. The fruit of this writerly union was *Bellerophôn* (1881) which was published as the joint work of 'Arran and Isla Leigh'. This very public collaboration, with the ambiguous relation between the apparently male and female authors, would prove extremely problematic to the critical reception of the book.

*Bellerophôn* is a conventionally structured five-act tragedy with an appended section of lyric poems. It is a hybrid work, poised at the cross-roads of genre which in the future will diverge as two separate, parallel outlets of Michael Field's published works. Wendy Bashant, in a recent essay, has provided what is so far the first commentary of this obscure, yet startling volume, placing the full focus of her argument upon the play. She claims that the play grew directly out of Bradley's association with Ruskin, and that it is an answer to his work on myth, *The Queen of the Air* (1869), where he writes extensively about the myth(s) of Athena, and the importance of mythology in the modern industrial world: 'Mythography reinvests meaning into lost symbols, reinventing forgotten arts' (Bashant 2006: 75). This is also a notion which extends into the lyric poems at the end of the collection. All of them, many forming short sequences, are concerned with famous myths and mythic figures. What results is a poetics deeply infused with the moral and visual tint of the classical past, which is formally and thematically unlike anything which Bradley had written alone.

One of the most intriguing pieces is the opening poem, ‘Adônîs and Aphrodîtê’, based upon the Titian painting of the same name. The first two stanzas are concerned with describing Aphrodîtê’s ‘godlike’ pride, her power over gods and mortals alike, and how, as a goddess, she has often herself been forced to grow ‘pale / With love’s dread languishment’ (*B*: 131, 10-11). The rhetoric of these two stanzas is heightened, somewhat overwrought, and distancing in its general effect. But this is all of a piece with the distance which lies between Aphrodîtê as goddess and the full experience of womanhood. However, there is a change in the third stanza which allows Aphrodîtê this experience, wrought by the presence of the object of her desire, Adônîs:

But never wert thou woman until now,  
 Suppliant, caressing, tremulous, and wild  
 At thine own impotence to win the brow  
 Of thy free hunter-boy, to thee, the child  
 That from the chase restrains. – Adônîs, haste  
 From the fair arms that belt thee; for blue eyes,  
 Blue radiant eyes, sun-lifted tearfully,  
 And a white bosom ruffled, wilt thou waste  
 The glorious manhood maidens tendril-wise  
 Creep to as vines; – for which she crept to thee?  
(*B*: 132, 20-29)

Denied satisfaction by the young Adônîs, stripped of her goddess status by love, she falls to the level of a terrestrial ‘woman’. Exactly half way through the stanza, the speaker’s voice breaks effortlessly away from addressing Aphrodîtê and her reduced circumstances, to speak directly to Adônîs, encouraging him to ‘haste’ away from the passion stricken goddess, even questioning him at the end of the stanza as to whether he is prepared to sacrifice the ‘glorious manhood’ which earthly maidens ‘Creep to as vines’. In the concluding stanza, the speaker returns to Aphrodîtê, ‘torn / By mortal pangs’ (*B*: 132, 30-1) as a result of being ‘slain / From quiver thou wert wont to fill’ (*B*: 132, 31-2), and advises her, quite brazenly, to ‘Be bold / To hide the haughty shame which ages thee’ (*B*: 132, 34-5). What Bradley and Cooper present here is a poetic tableau where desire is heightened by denial and presented as an essentially humanising force. The poem is notable for its almost cruel depiction of Aphrodîtê, but her suffering is essential, both in that she feels something of what she has made others feel, and also in that the goddess of love becomes more human, more empathetic. Essentially, this is the first ekphrastic poem which Bradley and Cooper



would publish together. However, as such, it is not overly sophisticated. The fact that the poem is based on a painting is only referred to as a footnote, it is not referenced in the title or the body of the work itself, just as the visuality of the painting, apart from the posing of Aphrodîtê and Adônîs, is not worked into the fabric of the text. The diction and rhetoric, like the figures it describes, are too static. But the presentation of desire, enflamed by rejection, is effectively realised by the dramatic splitting of the speaker's address. Overall, this is a poem which shows the depth with which Bradley and Cooper were capable of assimilating classical and mythic models, but with little of the technical finesse of which they were capable.

'The Song of Hêrô' represents just such a development. It is a retelling of the popular myth of Hero and Leander, the doomed priestess and her youthful lover who live on opposite sides of the Hellespont. Hero dwells in Sestos, at the temple of Aphrodite, and Leander in Abydos. As a priestess of Aphrodite, Hero must preserve her virginity. Succumbing to the advances of Leander, she agrees to meet him under the cover of night in order that the goddess does not learn of their love. Each night, Leander swims the Hellespont, guided by a light placed in Hero's window. One fateful night, Hero's light is snuffed by the wind, and the following morning Leander is washed up dead on the shore of Sestos. As a result, Hero leaps to her death from her tower. Bradley and Cooper's poem forms the internal monologue of Hêrô as she awaits the arrival of her lover. Coupled with the intimacy of the first person speaker is a vivid, visual intensity: 'I wait my lover; deep curves through the golden ripples he raises, / The moon glows clear on the marble' (*B*: 138, 17-18). As she waits, she contemplates the passions of the immortal gods, of the moon goddess Selênê, of Orion, killed by his thwarted lover, the huntress Artemis. What follows in stanza five is a reaffirmation of the sentiments expressed in 'Adônîs and Aphrodîtê': 'Can she guard the flock, or the maiden throng / Who through youth immortal hath ne'er been young? / Nay, pure through noble pain she can heal, / Cleansed from lifeless pride by a sacred passion' (*B*: 139, 35-8). Desire enflamed and then denied humanises the sufferer. It is impossible to worship deities who have not suffered the same pangs that mortals endure. Christ experienced physical suffering on the cross, but he never pined away for the love of another who did not return his physical desire. In this way, Bradley and Cooper find and promote a pagan mode of worship and of experiencing divine and erotic desire which is not offered by the cool morality of Christianity.

The poem ends with Hêrô awaiting the arrival of her lover. All the while, he has probably been dead, or in the process of drowning. It is a heavy dramatic irony that as Hêrô speaks her song of great lovers who suffered losses, she herself is about to go through the same experience. In the following poem, ‘The Halycons’ which serves as a companion piece, a third-person voice tells of two bodies, floating in the surf whipped up by the storm-wind: ‘Death with a ring of wild surf has wed them; / Dead lips to lips they have kissed in Death’s sleep; / The scattered foam-flowers and the billows that shed them / Fade and weep’ (*B*: 141, 13-16). The effect of this perhaps tends towards the overly sentimental, but the image and its cumulative dramatic effect over the course of the two poems is nonetheless powerful. What these two poems represent is an early, effective marriage between the lyric form and the dramatic devices of narrative, irony, and persona. Also, the quasi Sapphic motif of the female singer, throwing herself into the sea for the loss of her male object of desire, will become increasingly cogent in their future work and personal mythology.

‘Êros and Psuchê’ is a sequence of eight sections which tells the myth of Psyche and her marriage to Eros. In the original tale from Apuleius – which Walter Pater would rework in *Marius the Epicurean* (1885)<sup>20</sup> – Psyche marries Eros without knowing who he is or what he looks like. Eros comes to her each night, but she is forbidden from looking at him. However, she gives in to temptation and when she finds that she is married to the god of love she is punished by his departure. In order to atone, she becomes a servant of Eros’ mother, Aphrodite, eventually to be forgiven and admitted to the status of a demi-goddess. Here again is the idea of the essentiality of suffering in order to reach a true appreciation of desire. Written as a series of sonnets, some sections being two sonnets connected end-to-end, the poem as a whole is arguably one of the most aesthetically accomplished and sustained in the collection. What the story allows is for Bradley and Cooper to enter into the voice of Psuchê at moments of deep passionate intensity:

Sweet, I must see thee, for the dream doth fade,  
My morning dream of thy lost loveliness,  
When in mine arms thy living beauty laid,

Pricks my keen sense more passionate to guess  
How glows the jewel sheathing night doth hide.–  
Are the curls gold my wondering fingers press?

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<sup>20</sup> *The Story of Cupid and Psyche* occurs in Chapter 5, ‘The Golden Book’: (Pater 1985: 70-86).

Do the smiles break in dimples when I chide  
Caressingly, and with soft touch entreat?  
Thou hast enriched me with thy voice to guide

My spirit to the gaze, divinely sweet,  
Where Love's mute lyre makes music. – Pityingly,  
Dreading a rapture for my soul unmeet,

Dost thou the bliss of thy great boon deny?  
Nay, I must gaze in worship, or I die!  
(B: 148-9, 29-42)

This is Psuchê in the throes of her early passion for Êros, before she has stolen the opportunity to look upon him while asleep. The voice is one driven almost senseless by the stimulation of the senses of touch and sound. The feel of her lover's body, the sound of his voice, awakens images within her mind which she longs to see embodied, literally made flesh. It is not enough that they exist in the mind, she longs to see them, to experience the sensuality of the lover's gaze. Gone are the romantic platitudes of *The New Minnesinger*, which addressed the dead male lover through images of ghosting, and those addressed to Cooper – though likewise deeply charged – through the medium of flower imagery. Here there is little attempt at ambiguity, the movement is towards erotic candour. This is a poem where lovers lie entwined in each other's arms, where touch works as a substitute and stimulus for sight. All of the vivid visual touches in the poem – Eros' curls, his smile – are communicated through Psuchê's words once she has translated them through the touch of her fingers into a verbal medium.

Following the loss of Êros, Psuchê works through her long redemption to be finally reunited with her lover. Along the way, the visual and sensual intensity of the poem is retained. The technical and emotional control, the seeming unity of the persona's voice, is all the more remarkable when it is considered that this poem was written by both Bradley and Cooper. As Ivor Treby's excellent catalogue of the Michael Field oeuvre shows, at this early period, many of the poems which went into *Bellerophôn* were works of a collaborative process so intense that it is impossible to accurately discern from the manuscript sources who contributed the most work (Treby 1998: 150-1).

In 'Êros and Psuchê', the object of desire is definitely masculine. But it is a youthful, soft, almost feminine masculinity which is idealised. Ambiguous terms

such as ‘Pricked’, and ‘unsheathed’ occur in relation to the male and his effect upon the feminine body. Such words hover on the border-line of double-entendre. The punning ‘Pricked’, in particular, occurs in Shakespeare’s twentieth sonnet and would have been familiar with Bradley and Cooper from this source.<sup>21</sup> Linguistic ambiguities such as these only serve to heighten the eroticism at play in these poems, creating a teasing, playful, yet eternally evasive semantic field of sensual possibility. This is the case in ‘Apollo’s Written Grief’, where the nature of thwarted desire is again dissected, but this time the desire under scrutiny is exclusively and blatantly homosexual. In this immense poem, told in twenty-seven dense eleven line stanzas, Apollo tells of his love for the lost ‘Hyakinthos’: ‘The fair boy only proud when I caressed; / My Hyakinthos of the ivory breast, / Meet offering for the sun-god the white shrine / Of thy young spirit panting for the light!’ (B: 159, 27-30). Chris White has seen this poem as being ‘a homo-political appeal for tolerance and an expression of the search for the right way of conducting a homosexual relationship’ (White 1990: 198). There is a certainly credibility lent to this reading if Bradley and Cooper’s speculated physical relationship at this time is taken into account. But this approach can limit the poem somewhat to a biographical interpretation. It is probably better to see this poem and the others in *Bellerophon* as variations on the theme of passionate desire, often overtly physical, which is legitimised in its intensity through the mythic/classical nature of the material, and also through the disguise of the authorial aliases.

The final poem, ‘When the Roses Were All White’, will appear again in *Underneath the Bough* (1893). It represents a new voice, by turns softer, clearer, more flexible and at home in a classical setting than anything which has preceded it:

Once, his feet amid the roses,  
 When the roses were all white,  
 Erôs wreathed the faint wan posies  
 Round Zeus’ goblet; but, ere sipping,  
 ’Mid the buds his ankle tripping,  
 Lavished half the vintage bright  
 On the roses, that, fresh-dripping,  
 Flushed the cup for heaven’s lipping  
 And the god’s eyes felt delight  
 That the roses were not white.

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<sup>21</sup> ‘But since she [Nature] pricked thee out for women’s pleasure, / Mine be thy love, and thy love’s use their treasure’ (Shakespeare 1992: 12, 13-14). To be ‘pricked out’ in this instance is to be chosen, singled out, but there is also the punning suggestion that it means to be endowed with male genitalia.

But the sweetest of the roses,  
 By that fiery rain unfed,  
 Coyly still her bosom closes,  
 Still the crimson vesture misses;  
 Pale 'mid all the purple this is;  
 Love, thy burning wine-drops shed!  
 When her blushes make my blisses,  
 Glowing answers to my kisses,  
 In thy triumph it be said  
 That the roses are all red.

(B: 181)

The poem unfolds, rose-like; the buoyancy of the rhythm carries the reader swiftly from opening to close far less clumsily than Erôs carrying the cup of wine to Zeus. The theme of purity amidst sensual revelry is itself eroticised, personified through the closed, pearly-white bloom of the rose which managed to avoid 'the fiery rain' of pleasurable desire. However, by kissing the young woman, the speaker claims triumph in making all of the roses red, through making the young woman blush. This poem, although written wholly by Bradley (Treby 1998: 151), strikes the tone of Michael Field's mature voice: tuneful, erotic, deeply pagan with a wayward, unfettered playfulness. Written by one woman to another, it is a beautiful close to this chapter of Bradley and Cooper's lives as Arran and Isla Leigh, and a promising opening gambit for their lives as Michael Field.

The most successful lyric poems in *Bellerophôn* have an aesthetic viscosity which is almost tactile in places, and which many of Bradley's poems in *The New Minnesinger* lacked. Yet at the same time, they also have a weighty verbosity which lacks the precision of the work which will follow. What the work of Arran and Isla Leigh has which the work of Arran alone lacked is a strong sense of dramatic thrust not only within the small sequences, but within the individual pieces themselves. If Bradley can be seen as the stronger lyric poet of the two, and Cooper the keener dramatist, then this collection represents the forging together of these two very different talents.

Critically speaking, the book was not very well received. Some reviews, such as this anonymous one from *The Academy* in 1881, were scathing:

The authors of this poem, or rather these poems, are very, very classical. Bellerophôn has his circumflex over his second o; Olumpos and Eurunome and (Heaven save the mark!) Psuche

make their unlovely appearance, and so forth. This being the case, Syrinx seems a little odd; Ganymede still odder. But their trumpery pedantry, which, in the absence of knowledge to excuse, if not to justify, it, has led the authors into all manner of grotesque blunders, is not compensated by any merits, either of conception or execution.

(Anon. 1881: 196)

The classical learning of the authors is called into question through the upbraiding of the complex use of circumflexes and archaic spelling. It is possible that Bradley and Cooper adopted this style in order to promote their learning, to lend authority to their use of myth; the irony is that it had the opposite effect. Isobel Hurst notes that women writers who used classical material were routinely ‘patronized by male scholars for mistakes in Greek accents or Latin quantities’ (Hurst 2006: 12). There is little doubt though that Bradley and Cooper were as knowledgeable about the classics, if not more so, than their probably male reviewer. However, dual authorship, along with the hint that there was at least one female hand at work was enough to guarantee the disparagement of reviewers and the reading public. Again, Bradley and Cooper were at the receiving end of criticism which stemmed from prejudicial ideas of what women could and should write about.

Although *The New Minnesinger* and *Bellerophôn* can easily be dismissed as juvenilia, it is important to remember them as the formative works of the two women who would later become Michael Field. These two works, different in form and tone, provide the fertile ground out of which the later poetic career of Michael Field will grow and eventually flourish. The driving themes of these early works – love; motherhood; religious questioning; feminism and the woman poet’s place in society; desire between elder and younger women; desire for young men; images of the self-sacrificing female artist; the relation between visual and verbal artistic expression; and pagan revelry – will all constantly recur for the rest of Bradley and Cooper’s writing lives. Michael Field, that liminal, indefinable, shifting creature, with one foot within the tradition of Victorian women’s poetry, the other within the wider canon of the classical past will form the mouthpiece for a voice – or rather, voices – creating a cycle of poetry in intimate conversation with the central aesthetic and cultural ideas of the age, as well as the intimate concerns of the private, dualised self.

## **Chapter 2. ‘Manifold Desire’: Voicing Sappho’s Songs in Long Ago (1889)**

The years between the publication of the poems in *Bellerophôn* and their first full collection of lyric poetry were a time of increasing popularity for Bradley and Cooper as Michael Field. The antiquated, intensely passionate and melodramatic closet-dramas *Calilrrhoë*, *Fair Rosamund* (1884), *The Father’s Tragedy*, *William Rufus*, *Loyalty or Love* (1885), *Brutus Ultor* (1886) and *Canute the Great*, *The Cup of Water* (1887) very quickly gained the respect of the critics and the London literati. Never prone to undue modesty concerning their work, Bradley and Cooper placed excerpts from their best reviews at the front of their new and re-issued plays. Hence, a reader coming afresh to Michael Field would be informed that: ‘here is a young writer, with plenty of convictions and plenty of courage. In addition, we may credit him with a fresh gift of song, a picturesque and vivid style, as yet without distinction or reserve’ (from *The Academy*, in Field 1885: iii) and: ‘Mr. Field has a voice of his own, whatever his sins of literary omission or commission, . . . a style which certainly possesses the rare merit of striking one as original and poetic’ (from *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine*, in Field 1885: iii). The critics accepted the masculine name at face value and judged the work on its merits. The collaboration was hidden, the suspicion of female authorship for a time successfully quashed. Michael Field stood centre stage in the glare of the limelight, but with his face shaded, indistinct. But this – after the experience at the hands of Ruskin and the critical fate of Arran and Isla Leigh – was how it was meant to be. Bradley and Cooper’s career as Michael Field was, initially, perfectly stage-managed.

Their popularity with critics and readers brought them to the attention of the most eminent male writers of their day. Many, such as Marc André Raffalovich, wrote adoring fan-mail to what they assumed was a young man. A. Mary F. Robinson went as far to suggest a seemingly clandestine meeting at her home at a time when ‘you would find me singularly alone as my mother & sister are gone for a few days to Wales; & no callers generally arrive till after four’ (Robinson in Thain 2007b: 5). It was, however, to be Robert Browning more than any other writer at this time who would help to foster their confidence, while at the same time being the person who inadvertently shattered the authorial illusion after being let in on the secret. After

initiating a correspondence with him in 1884, Cooper wrote about Michael Field's real identity after dropping teasing hints to him:

My aunt and I work together after the fashion of Beaumont and Fletcher. She is my senior, by but fifteen years. She has lived with me, taught me, encouraged me and joined me to her poetic life. [...] Some of the scenes of our play are like mosaic-work – the mingled, various product of our two brains. [...] I think if our contributions were disentangled and one subtracted from the other, the amount would be almost even. This happy union of two in work and aspiration is sheltered and expressed by 'Michael Field.' Please regard him as the author.

(WD 1933: 3)

Collaboration for Bradley and Cooper becomes a moment of mingling, where the products of their separate brains, their individual personalities, fuse into an intricate web, a 'mosaic' of their happy intellectual and spiritual union. Bradley would use similar terms in May 1886 when describing the partnership to Havelock Ellis when he sought to know who wrote which poems: 'As to our work, let no man think he can put asunder what God has joined. [...] the work is perfect mosaic: we cross and interlace like a company of dancing summer flies' (Bradley in Sturgeon 1921: 47). Echoing the language of the marriage ceremony, and delicately ghosting and interlacing with Cooper's own letter to Browning, Bradley's letter affirms and enacts the collage effect of their two separate voices. The end of this practice, the product of the combination of the two voices, is to be the singular, separate voice of 'Michael Field'. As Cooper affirmed, 'Please regard *him* as the author.'

As I have shown in Chapter One, the reasons why they would want to cover their collaboration and use a male pseudonym are quite clear. Bradley dramatically highlights this point for Browning:

The revelation of that [dual authorship] would indeed be utter ruin to us; but the report of lady authorship will dwarf and enfeeble our work at every turn. Like the poet Gray we shall never 'speak out.'<sup>22</sup> And we have many things to say that the world will not tolerate from a woman's lips. We must be free as dramatists to

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<sup>22</sup> This famous phrase appears in Matthew Arnold's essay on Thomas Gray: 'he lived in ease and leisure, yet a few pages still hold all his poetry; *he never spoke out* in poetry' (Arnold 1895: xliii-iv). [Italics in original]. This apparently refers to Gray's slim output and ostensibly impersonal style. It is now a more loaded term, having overtones of the reticence over his sexuality. The same applies to Bradley and Cooper's use of the phrase: their secrecy over their gender and collaboration may also be said to act as a cover for deeper transgressions.



work out in the open air of nature – exposed to her vicissitudes,  
witnessing her terrors: we cannot be stifled in drawing-room  
conventionalities.

(WD 1933: 6)

This wish for an open-air poetics, un-stifled by the enclosed, domestic atmosphere of the drawing room moves away from Elizabeth Barrett Browning's intention of 'rushing into drawing-rooms and the like [...] meeting face to face and without mask the Humanity of the age, and speaking the truth as I conceive of it out plainly' (Barrett Browning 1946: 32). The drawing room is not the space to voice the sentiments that 'the world will not tolerate from a woman's lips', and, what is more, it is not an enterprise that Bradley and Cooper feel they can undergo without a protective mask with which to face 'the age'. As a man, or under the cover of masculine authorship, they could both write together on otherwise taboo subjects, and, what is more, in a forthright, uninhibited manner not altogether acceptable in women's writing at the time.

And yet, there is something more to this name, this *him*, which lingers in the mind after reading Cooper's letter. Marion Thain has commented: 'The name "Michael Field" hides, or highlights, two important aspects of Bradley and Cooper's actual identity: their duality and their femininity' (Thain 2000: 19). This is certainly true, but it only 'highlights' their duality and femininity if the reader is in on the secret. Chris White has stated more directly that 'Michael Field is not a disguise. Nor is it a pretence at being a man' (White 1990: 208). What White is stressing is the performative nature of the name. The true reason for the name Michael Field is to create a textual space where Bradley and Cooper's voices can 'interlace', and one which will place them outside of masculine restriction on the female poetic voice. Michael Field is his own person, his own voice; he becomes his own elusive myth.

Such considerations as these, concerning collaboration and authorial identity, are of central importance when assessing the initial impact and legacy of Michael Field's first major collection of verse, *Long Ago* (1889). In 1885, following the publication of H. T. Wharton's translations of the full corpus of the Sapphic fragments into English for the first time, Bradley and Cooper began to be attracted to the idea of resurrecting the fractured voice of Sappho, re-working the actual translated fragments into new complete poems, through the proxy of Michael Field.

The result of this project of translation and re-imagination of the Sapphic fragments resulted in a work which is unique within the Victorian tradition of Sapphic literature. *Long Ago* is, in effect, two women writing as a man who himself is writing as Sappho; what results is a hall of mirrored authorial identities and ghosted texts which have been through the process of translation several times. Many critics of Michael Field, in particular Angela Leighton and Chris White, have focused upon this collection – or, at least, certain poems from this volume – to support the argument for a new form of Lesbian poetics. While not wishing wholly to dispute this, what I will do in this chapter is to consider the ways in which Sappho and the Sapphic texts allow Michael Field to explore a far wider spectrum of human desires – heterosexual, homosexual, maternal, artistic, creative/destructive. At the same time I will look at the varying readings which are created when the gender of the supposed male author is taken into consideration, as well as placing the text in its proper context within Victorian Sapphic writing.

### **Sapphic Tradition: Singing Sappho's Songs**

In her 1921 critical biography of Michael Field, Mary Sturgeon affirmed: ‘it was not so audacious as it seemed for two Victorian ladies to plunge into the task of rendering Sapphic ecstasy’ (Sturgeon 1921: 90). On the surface, this is essentially true. When Bradley and Cooper began work on *Long Ago*, they were not only writing within a well established tradition of Victorian literary Sapphism, but also within a much wider and ancient tradition in world literature which originated with Ovid in the first century AD. His Sappho – dramatised in the verse epistle ‘Sappho to Phaon’ in the *Heroides* – is a tragic figure driven to suicide by a scorned passion for a younger man, the fisherman Phaon. Ovid’s Sappho has little or no relation to her surviving lyrics but became the accepted, unquestioned form of the Sapphic myth which was to affect the way in which she was approached and re-appropriated by other artists and writers over the succeeding centuries. Alexander Pope’s 1712 translation of Ovid’s monologue, arguably more than any other literary work, became the key departure point for many English writers becoming acquainted with the Sappho myth. This was particularly true of women writers who were denied a classical education, and thereby personal access to the original fragments. The two most important works of Sapphic reproduction at the turn of the century were

Germaine de Staël's novel *Corinne* (1807), and Mary Robinson's sonnet sequence *Sappho and Phaon* (1796). These two works dramatise the Sappho myth in different ways: de Staël updated the story to eighteenth century Italy, while Robinson chose to recreate the erotic atmosphere and landscapes of Lesbos in her lush *Della Cruscan* style. Yet what both works do is to recreate Sappho as an emblem of the ultimate female artist destroyed by the indifference of a male lover; the female poet crushed by the harsh realities of a ruthless patriarchal order. The different Sapphos which de Staël and Robinson created were similar in the sense that they became reflections of their authors' own larger-than-life personalities and ambitions. Mary Robinson stated in her Introduction:

The story of the LESBIAN MUSE, though not new to the classical reader, presented to my imagination such a lively example of the human mind, enlightened by the most exquisite talents, yet yielding to the destructive controul [sic] of ungovernable passions, that I felt an irresistible impulse to attempt the delineation of their progress; mingling with the glowing picture of her soul, such moral reflections, as may serve to exite [sic] that pity, which, while it proves the susceptibility of the heart, arms it against the danger of indulging a too luxuriant fancy.

(Robinson 1796: 17)

Sappho as text, as actual personal voice was not important (not that she was in any way accessible); Sappho as woman, alternately venerated and wounded by her society was a more attractive, if chastening, artistic forbear. She was a moral figure – a warning. The myth became the only truth required, despite this myth being fabricated and circulated in the first instance by male writers.

Barrett Browning, while looking for female poetic ancestors in her youth, wrote that 'I look everywhere for grandmothers and see none' (Barrett Browning 1996: 484). And yet, for the female poets in the early decades of the nineteenth century, even Barrett Browning herself, Sappho was mother, sister, teacher and artist – the first and greatest female lyric poet – and also a warning of all that they stood to suffer and lose if they were not prepared to compromise their desires and artistic vision. Felicia Hemans, Letitia Elizabeth Landon, Caroline Norton amongst others invoked Sappho, wrote in her voice, and interpreted her in terms of their own difficult

circumstances.<sup>23</sup> More often than not, their Sapphos are to be glimpsed sitting in despair, lyre at their feet, voiceless in desperation at being abandoned by Phaon, or, having lost the ability to write – and therefore, her identity – and also her economic viability. She is commonly to be seen poised upon the cliffs of Leucadia, in the moments before suicide. Letitia Elizabeth Landon, whose life and career tragically mirrored that of this lachrymose Sappho figure, sums up the plangent tone which many of these images of Sappho created: ‘It was my evil star above, / Not my sweet lute, that wrought me wrong: / It was not song that taught me love, / But it was love that taught me song’ (Landon 1997: 56, 149-52). Sappho acts as both role-model and emotional conduit for these isolated and compromised women of letters, eagerly trying to carve their name into the canon. For all her fame and the camaraderie she offered, this Sappho was as potentially harmful as she was helpful, for as Margaret Reynolds has noted, self-destruction ‘soon became the marker for the destiny of the woman poet’ (Reynolds 2003: 110).

A very different kind of Sappho began to appear in the writings of French male writers in the middle decades of the nineteenth century. While for the female writers in England the rumours of Sappho’s sexual ambiguity did not figure, or were not seen as important, here, for the first time, her rumoured homosexuality, her lesbianism in the modern sense, was placed centre stage. For Gautier, but particularly Charles Baudelaire, she and her female followers became emblems for all that was lurid, sordid and monstrous in sexuality. In England, a similar thing was happening. Male writers, in particular Algernon Charles Swinburne and Alfred Lord Tennyson were looking to Sappho as a poetic forebear, but now as a textual inspiration for their own lyric poetry. Swinburne can be seen as epitomising the Baudelairean tradition of monstrous Sapphic depiction and appropriation of her voice in works such as ‘Anactoria’ in the scandalous *Poems and Ballads* (1866).<sup>24</sup> Yet below the surface of this poem and others lies a more spiritual allegiance to her life and works than mere surface sensation. In a letter of 13 January 1880, he would state: ‘Sappho is simply nothing less – as she is certainly nothing more – than the greatest poet who ever was at all. – There, at all events, you have the simple and sincere profession of my

<sup>23</sup> Such noteworthy examples are Felicia Hemans’ ‘The Last Song of Sappho’ (Hemans 2000: 465-6), Caroline Norton’s ‘The Picture of Sappho’ (Leighton & Reynolds 1995: 136-8), and Christina Rossetti’s ‘Sappho’ (Rossetti 2001: 613-4).

<sup>24</sup> ‘I would find grievous ways to have thee slain, / Intense device, and superflux of pain; / Vex thee with amorous agonies, and shake / Life at thy lips, and leave it there to ache’ (Swinburne 1904: 58, 27-30).

lifelong faith' (Swinburne 1960: 123-4). For Tennyson, likewise, she represented the ideal model for the lyric expression of intense desire. Furthermore, Linda H. Peterson states that 'Tennyson used Sappho as a vehicle for self-definition' (Peterson 1994: 123). In his early lyric poems from the 1830s we can sense not only strong echoes of her actual voice, but also glimpse the stylistic impact of her guttering, diaphanous forms:

While I muse upon thy face;  
And a languid fire creeps  
Through my veins to all my frame,  
Dissolvingly and slowly: soon  
From thy rose-red lips MY name  
Floweth; and then, as in a swoon,  
With dinning sound my ears are rife,  
My tremulous tongue faltereth,  
I lose my colour, I lose my breath,  
I drink the cup of a costly death,  
Brimmed with delirious drafts of warmest life.  
(Tennyson 1969: 371, 129-139)

This, from the eighth stanza of 'Eleänore' (1832) is a powerful assimilation of Sappho's remaining Fragment 31.<sup>25</sup> In 'Fatima', Tennyson takes this a step further by assuming the female persona to voice the Sapphic fragment to create a moment of intense, erotic desire: 'Last night, when someone spoke his name, / From my swift blood that went and came / A thousand little shafts of flame / Were shivered in my narrow frame' (Tennyson 1969: 383, l. 15-18). What Tennyson and Swinburne find in the Sapphic fragments – which they knew well – is a powerful model for expressing the bodily effects of desire – of projecting the inner emotional world onto the outer physical reality – as well as a model for form. Sappho's remains were literally worked into the body of their own oeuvre. In the words of Margaret Reynolds she becomes a 'private "mother-Muse"' (Reynolds 2003: 13) for these male writers. But what makes Swinburne and Tennyson unique in their assimilation of Sappho, and what separates them from writers such as Baudelaire who was purely concerned with sexual aberration, is the fact that she allows them to express –

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<sup>25</sup> H.T. Wharton places this as his second fragment and offers the following prose translation: 'That man seems to me peer of gods, who sits in thy presence, and hears close to him thy sweet speech and lovely laughter; that indeed makes my heart flutter in my bosom. For when I see thee but a little, I have no utterance left, my tongue is broken down, and straightway a subtle fire has run under my skin, with my eyes I have no sight, my ears ring, sweat bathes me, and a trembling seizes all my body: I am paler than grass, and in my madness seem little better than one dead' (Wharton 1885: 58-9).

through being a legitimating, empathetic proxy – powerful, subversive same-sex desires.

In 1885, Henry Thornton Wharton published a full prose translation of the extant fragments for the very first time in English: *Sappho: Memoir, Text, Selected Renderings and a Literal Translation*. This was a vital and innovative work which meant that readers unable to understand the original Greek, particularly women, now had full and unrestricted access to the whole of Sappho's oeuvre, her own voice – albeit in translation – for the first time. As Wharton triumphantly proclaimed:

My sole desire in these pages is to present 'the great poetess' to English readers in a form which they can judge of her excellence for themselves, so far as that is possible for those to whom Aeolic Greek is unfamiliar. [...] Now that, through the appreciation of Sappho by modern poets and painters, her name is becoming day by day more familiar, it seems time to show her as we know her to have been, to those who have neither leisure nor power to read her in the tongue in which she wrote.

(Wharton 1885: x-xi)

It is directly from this work, with its democratic spirit of access-for-all, that a new school of Sapphic re-interpretation would flower. The female poet – and the woman who loved women – was finally able to celebrate this fact through this new, apparently authenticated voice of Sappho. This tradition, which would lead to the overtly lesbian works of H.D. (Hilda Doolittle) and Natalie Clifford Barney amongst others, had its roots in Wharton's translation, and was arguably initiated by Bradley and Cooper through Michael Field's *Long Ago*. In their Preface they would claim: 'Devoutly as the fiery-bosomed Greek turned in her anguish to Aphrodite, praying her to accomplish her heart's desires, I have turned to the one woman who has dared to speak unfalteringly of the fearful mastery of love' (*LA*: iii). While Michael Field's Sappho finds a new language for expressing erotic passion between women, the strong heterosexual desires for Phaon remain. Though the fragments, translated by Wharton, are incorporated into *Long Ago*, there remains a heavy dependence upon the traditional myth of Sappho's life which is appropriated from Mary Robinson's sequence as well as from Wharton's short biography. As will be shown, it was not the exclusively lesbian aspects of Sappho's voice that appealed to Michael Field, but the inclusively broad ability to express the wider spectrum of emotional and artistic desires.

Michael Field's collection acts as a full stop for the tradition of Hemans, Landon, Robinson, Rossetti and Norton. However, with the complexity of authorial identity, coupled with the strong vein of heterosexual desire which runs through the sequence, it also sits, as I hope to illustrate, within the sphere of male Sapphic writing, as exemplified by Swinburne and Tennyson. Quite literally, Bradley and Cooper, with the help of Michael Field, queer the pitch of desire, collaboration and translation at all levels, paving the way for the more sexually overt Sapphism in high modernist women's poetry.

### **'They plaited garlands in their time'**

The opening poem in *Long Ago*, 'They plaited garlands in their time,' perfectly sets the tone and atmosphere of the collection, creating a textual space, an authentic Hellenic stage, upon which Michael Field's Sappho will later perform:

They plaited garlands in their time;  
They knew the joy of youth's sweet prime,  
    Quick breath and rapture:  
Theirs was the violet-weaving bliss,  
And theirs the white, wreathed brow to kiss,  
    Kiss, and recapture.

They plaited garlands, even these;  
They learnt Love's golden mysteries  
    Of young Apollo;  
The lyre unloosed their souls; they lay  
Under the trembling leaves at play,  
    Bright dreams to follow.

(*LA*: 3, 1-12)

This poem is a vibrant effusion stemming from fragment 73 of Wharton's translation: 'But in their time they plaited garlands' (Wharton 1885: 105). What Michael Field does is to take this fragment – not only of a poem, but of a sentence – and weave from and around it a fantasy of an idealised female company, based upon comradeship and unity, garnered not only from a shared creative task, but also through the landscape and the nurturing sphere of art. These young women, sharing both work and education, learn the 'golden mysteries' of love from Apollo's music – for which Sappho is the conduit – and the cool and nurturing landscape whose spring leaves tremble in unison with their awakening desires. These women are working

outside the confines of the home, away from the jurisdiction of men, ‘out in the open air of nature.’ This freedom for women was rare in the time of Sappho, around the sixth century BC, and yet as Wharton makes clear in his Introduction, with reference to the work of John Addington Symonds, it was the peculiar mood and atmosphere of life and the landscape on Lesbos which allowed such freedom, and therefore provided the conditions for the works of Sappho and her followers to flourish. The landscape of Lesbos is central to the metaphorical dimensions of Sapphic poetry, and also to the liberal attitudes which are present in her work. As Wharton quotes from Symonds:

All the luxuries and elegances of life which that climate and the rich valleys of Lesbos could afford, were at their disposal: exquisite gardens, in which the rose and hyacinth spread perfume; river-beds ablaze with the oleander and wild pomegranate; olive-groves and fountains, where the cyclamen and violet flowered with feathery maidenhair; pine-shadowed coves, where they might bathe in the calm of a tideless sea; fruits such as only the southern sea and sea-wind can mature; marble cliffs, starred with jonquil and anemone in spring, aromatic with myrtle and lentisk and samphire and wild rosemary through all the months; nightingales that sang in May; temples dim with dusky gold and bright with ivory, statues and frescoes of heroic forms. In such scenes as these the Lesbian poets lived, and thought of Love. When we read their poems, we seem to have the perfumes, colours, sounds, and lights of that luxurious land distilled in verse. [...] We find nothing burdensome in its sweetness. All is so rhythmically and sublimely ordered in the poems of Sappho that supreme art lends solemnity and grandeur to the expression of unmitigated passion.

(Symonds in Wharton 1885: 12-13)

Symonds presents a landscape purely of the imagination, alive with the spirit, the pure essence of poetry which only needs to be distilled into language, into a semblance of form, like wine into a decanter. Michael Field seeks to achieve a similar effect through the influence of nature as depicted in the Sapphic fragments. What results is an eroticised landscape, but one which is also rich in authentic, quotidian detail, like an Alma-Tadema painting. It is a landscape from long ago, yet one which, in its small details, is rendered immediately visible and recognisable.

**‘Put me on Phaon’s lips to rest’**



Immediately following this gentle introduction the voice of Sappho emerges, plunging the reader directly into the dramatic action, which, at this juncture, is concerned with her unfulfilled passion for the young fisherman Phaon. Recent critics, such as Yopie Prins (Prins: 1999a) and Terry Castle (Castle 2002: 167-9), have acknowledged the presence of heterosexual desire in this collection, but have tended to sideline it, focusing upon the lesbian erotics at the centre of the book. However, the heterosexual desires of Sappho to Phaon, and the almost completely overlooked presence of Alcaeus, are central to a full appreciation of this complex and alluring text. Rather than being a mere introit to the poems of love between women, the poems about Phaon at the opening initiate a triangle of heterosexual desire which runs intermittently throughout the whole narrative. Rather than diluting the homosexual dimensions of the collection, these poems concerning Sappho's heterosexual forays hide even more subversive homosexual undercurrents if the author is taken to be male.

Poem 'II' is the first to appear in the voice of Sappho. It is a tenderly erotic lyric telling of her unrequited passion for Phaon, invoking 'Sleep' during the long midnight hours to help bridge the gap between unrequited desire and consummation: 'Come dark-eyed Sleep, thou child of Night / Give me thy dreams, thy lies; / Lead through the horny portal white / The pleasure day denies' (*LA*: 4, 1-4). Sappho's feelings for the absent loved one are based upon the possibility of physical pleasure: 'Put me on Phaon's lips to rest and cheat the cruel day!' (*LA*: 4, 11-12). At this moment it matters little whether desire is fulfilled, in reality or in the imagination: Sappho cares little whether touch is achieved through a deception of Day, the loved one, or of the self. This small poem of unrequited love is as much a contemplation upon the ways in which the aesthetic imagination – Art itself – can bridge the gap between emotional desire and physical touch. The tone is gentle, plangent, shot through with wistful resignation, but with an ebullient pleasure in defying reality, with Sappho actively prostrating herself on the mouth of the now submissive young man. At this stage, such harmless communion with the beloved is enough. Sappho is happy to possess Phaon bodily in the mind if not in actuality.

'III' is a fantastically rich and playful piece along the same lines as its predecessor. Sappho is still contemplating her spurned passion for Phaon, but now is no longer satisfied to let desire turn cold in the mind; she is determined for it to blossom, literally, in the flesh. Michael Field takes the vaguer yet allusive fragment

113 from Wharton's collection: 'Neither honey nor bee for me' (Wharton 1885: 131) and draws around it a rich and evocative landscape which 'Sappho' can inhabit, depicting her promiscuity, as well as her determination to achieve carnal satisfaction:

Oh, not the honey, nor the bee!  
Yet who can drain the flowers  
As I? Less mad, Persephone  
Spoiled the Sicilian bowers  
Than I for scent and splendour rove  
The rosy Oleander grove,  
Or lost in myrtle nook unveil  
Thoughts that make Aphrodite pale.  
(LA: 5, 1-8)

Throughout, the imagery richly brings to life the landscape of Sappho's surroundings. While standing in the grove of wild flowers, amidst the scenes of past conquests, past fulfilments, she feels herself, through the indifference of Phaon, to be cut off from the joys of love and lust which the flowers and the bees – along with her past self – take for granted:

Honey nor bee! the tingling quest  
Must that too be denied?  
Deep in thy bosom I would rest,  
O golden blossom wide!  
O poppy wreath, O violet-crow,  
I fling your fiery circlets down;  
The joys o'er which bees murmur deep  
Your Sappho's senses may not steep.  
(LA: 5, 9-16)

Sappho, as the active lover, as the roving, pollen-delirious bee, has turned penetrator. The lines between masculine pursuit and female submission have become blurred to say the least in what appears to be a reversal of roles. Sappho wishes to lie not on the bosom of the beloved, but *in* it. And yet, by the same token, the image of the bee as the assertive male becomes more complex when it is remembered that the worker bees, the Drones who would be in the Oleander grove, were actually female. Seeking to delve to the heart of the flowers of desire, and what turns out to be the lips of Phaon, Sappho embodies – just like Bradley and Cooper as 'Michael Field' – both masculine and feminine agency at the same time.

This barely coded sexual imagery of 'fiery circlets', penetrative bees and glistening nectars reaches an impassioned climax in the third and final stanza where,

poised unfulfilled on a note of Keatsian intensity, Sappho invokes Love to help her fulfil what the rest of nature enjoys and which she currently lacks:

Honey! clear, soothing, nectarous, sweet,  
On which my heart would feed,  
Give me, O Love, the golden meat,  
And stay my life's long greed –  
The food in which the gods delight,  
That glistens tempting in my sight!  
Phaon, thy lips withhold from me  
The bliss of honey and of bee.

(LA: 6, 17-24)

This stanza is perfectly balanced between serious poetic utterance and playful tongue-in-cheek self-parody; the double-entendres are almost single, yet joyously and exuberantly so. The convoluted, maze-like syntax of the first stanza has melted away into a rich, vocal plea for sexual satisfaction. As Chris White has stated, the honey that Sappho craves is 'a food that is not itself reproductive, but which stands in a relationship to reproduction, and which, for the one who eats the honey, gives pleasure' (White 1996a: 59). What Sappho craves is not the reproductive fruit of pollination, of the sexual act, but its sweet by-product, the glistening 'golden meat' of the honey comb – of Phaon's young body. A corresponding episode is to be found in sonnet XII of Mary Robison's *Sappho and Phaon*:

While down yon agate column gently flows  
A glitt'ring streamlet of ambrosial dew!  
My Phaon smiles!

[....]

While slow vibrations, dying on the breeze,  
Shall sooth his soul with harmony divine!  
Then let my form his yielding fancy seize,  
And all his fondest wishes, blend with mine.  
(Robinson 1796: 50, 3-5 & 11-14)

These lines none too subtly dance between poetic and quasi-pornographic utterance. The seminal 'glitt'ring streamlet of ambrosial dew' corresponds with Michael Field's concupiscent 'golden meat', yet Robinson's Sappho is far more direct in her intentions for the physical blending of her 'form' with Phaon's 'fancy'. Robinson may be more visually arresting in her piece, but, with her lack of discretion through

creating an overtly eroticised landscape which literally vibrates with little deaths, ‘dying on the breeze’, she lacks Michael Field’s subtle mixing – or blurring – of metaphor and meaning. At the end of the poem Michael Field’s Sappho is denied the bliss of honey or bee from the presumably closed and averted ‘fiery circlets’ of Phaon’s lips; she is denied the bliss of sampling honey as the bee, or alternately as being the honey which is sampled. A poem which delicately obscures the lines between the masculine and the feminine – with Sappho as the hermaphroditic bee and Love/Phaon as the flower – becomes even more complex if the author, the speaker behind the Sapphic mask, is gendered male. On the one hand, Bradley and Cooper produce a work which demonstrates the joys yet ultimate frustrations of Sappho’s heterosexual pursuits, whereas Michael Field arguably voices an equally powerful, far more subversive poem of homosexual love through the proxy of the ancient poetess, where the elder man is tantalisingly spurned by the younger, and the lines between masculine and feminine are oblique. ‘III’ is an elaborate visual and textual game where the male superimposes the female – and vice-versa – both in terms of sexual imagery as well as in the question of authorial identity.

The tantalising sting in the tail of heterosexual desire which is contained in ‘III’ becomes more painful through the succeeding pieces. In ‘V’, the anguish which Sappho feels from Phaon’s rejection achieves a poignant and aesthetically accomplished height:

So underneath thy scorn and pride  
My heart is bowed, and cannot hide  
How it despairs.  
O Phaon, weary is my pain;  
The tears that from my eyelids rain  
Ease not my cares;  
My beauty droops and fades away,  
Just as a trampled blossom’s may.  
Why must thou tread me into earth –  
So dim in death, so bright at birth?  
(*LA*: 8, 11-20)

The tone, so resigned, melancholy, plaintive, could not be more removed from that of the previous poem. The racy, classical glow and joy in linguistic and physical play has dispersed in favour of a more stately and measured outpouring of longing and grief. Michael Field’s Sappho now sees herself as being the perpetual injured party in male-female sexual relations, the eternal ‘purple flower / [...] pressed to earth’ (*LA*:

8, 3-4) by the indifferent male. The traditional boundaries of gender categorisation are here reaffirmed with the female being quite literally broken under the foot of the male. From now on in *Long Ago*, despite Sappho's continual focus upon the beautiful body of Phaon, it is to be the feelings of rejection and superfluity which will remain most prominent, as in 'XI': 'Phaon grew conscious I stood by; / And oh! To bury in thy wave, / Lethe, one day, the glance he gave!' (*LA*: 17, 10-12). This rejection and resultant self-hatred, coupled with lingering desire, manifests itself in a wish to see the loved-one suffer, even die. The vicissitudes of heterosexual desire do not become clearer, they become increasingly bound up in a web of recrimination and longing which ensnares Michael Field's Sappho as much as it creates the impulse for lyric utterance.

Soon following this episode in the sequence, there emerges another voice – that of the female poet focusing upon the beauty and companionship of her female followers – which draws solace in their company and their physical beauty away from the more scorching heat of heterosexuality: 'Dica, the Graces oft incline / To watch thy finger's skill / As with light foliage they entwine / The aromatic dill' (*LA*: 20, 1-4). This initiates the rich seam of poems to and about Sappho's female followers which almost dominates the centre of the book, and puts in place the triangle of erotic allegiance between Sappho and masculine and feminine love objects. Joan DeJean has termed Sappho's preoccupation with triangular desire as the 'geometry of Sapphic eroticism' (DeJean 1989: 35). This is a framework which Michael Field diligently adopts and explores from all perspectives. The sudden appearance of a female object of desire in 'XIII' is not the end of the lip-service which is to be paid to the myth of Sappho's heterosexual passions. Indeed, early on in the collection emerges another triangle: one between Sappho, Phaon, and the figure of the young Alcaeus.

The presence of Alcaeus in *Long Ago* opens up a fascinating yet often ignored aspect of Michael Field's Sappho's range of desire. Alcaeus, as a historical figure, was a contemporary of Sappho's. His work, too, exists only in fragments. One key influence for his depiction in *Long Ago* is most probably Alma-Tadema's painting *Sappho* (1881), where she is depicted listening to the young male poet singing his poetry. Sappho, along with her train of female followers, sits rapt while the young man performs. Clearly, in this case, he is the masculine force entering the all-female society, and immediately winning the attention of its leader. In *Long Ago*, however,

he emerges as a young suitor to Michael Field's Sappho, and yet, as the elder of the two, she feels the pressing incompatibility of their personalities, while seeing a direct parallel with her own experiences:

Thine elder that I am, thou must not cling  
To me, nor mournful for my love entreat:  
And yet, Alcaeus, as the sudden spring  
Is love, yea, and to the veiled Demetia sweet.

Sweeter than tone of harp, more gold than gold  
Is thy young voice to me; yet, ah, the pain  
To learn I am beloved now I am old,  
Who, in my youth, loved, as thou must, in vain.  
(LA: 49)

Here in 'XXX', Sappho unveils the heavy irony of romantic relationships: it is while searching in vain for the love of a younger man that Sappho is approached amorously by the young Alcaeus. The strange irony at play, right from the opening line, is that it is not Alcaeus' youth which disqualifies him as a physical lover, nor his poetic vocation, which, if anything, makes him all the more eligible than the humble fisherman. The reason why he is not suited to Sappho is that he is *not* Phaon: he is attainable. Despite the pain of her situation – stuck between two thwarted heterosexual relationships – she is able to connect with Alcaeus on a level of empathetic equality which Phaon does not deem fit to do with her. Still, Alcaeus manages to linger in the margins of *Long Ago*, haunting Sappho's conscience, remaining a continual presence, a reminder of the unfairness of romantic longing and the endurance of unfulfilled desires, as 'XL' demonstrates:

Alcaeus trembles while  
He runs dark fingers o'er the golden lyre;  
His lifted eyes require  
With looks of fervent pain my tardy smile.

On Mitylene's shore,  
Coiling his nets about the lovely head,  
Goes Phaon with free tread:  
Remembering this, I hear the plaint no more.  
(LA: 62-3, 13-20)

Just the thought of Phaon is enough to obliterate the presence of Alcaeus. Heterosexuality is not a transient phase for Michael Field's Sappho – it is a constant

source of promise and compromise, of pleasure and regret which has the power to endlessly inspire, as well as to stifle, the possibility for poetic expression. Heterosexual love for this Sappho is about rejection and deferral; it is constantly fraught with emotional intensity, proffering much while yielding little reward.

**‘Maids, not to you my mind doth change’**

In the centre of *Long Ago*, its literal heart, in the midst of – not after – the heterosexual triangle, Michael Field’s Sappho offers up a series of songs to and about her female followers which are unparalleled in women’s verse of this period for their tenderness and subtle erotic suggestion. Whether they can be classed as overtly lesbian texts – and the extent to which they are intended as such – is open to endless debate. What they do illustrate are the new possibilities for Sapphic appropriation and interpretation which grew from readers being able to access the full range of Sappho’s verse due to Wharton’s translation. These poems also offer a refreshing antidote to the more sweaty and monstrous depictions of Sapphic same-sex desire in the mid-century writings of the French Decadents.

One of the earliest and most arresting manifestations of overt desire between Sappho and one of her maids occurs in ‘XIV’: ‘Atthis, my darling, thou did’st stray / A few feet to the rushy bed / When a great fear and passion shook / My heart lest haply thou wert dead’ (*LA*: 22, 1-4). Alerted by fear to the possible loss of the young maid, Sappho remains poised in solitude by the edge of the brook, feeling ‘As if a soul were drawn away’ (*LA*: 22, 6). However, moments later, Atthis appears with ‘clear eyes’, bearing the celandine which she braved the danger of the brook to fetch for Sappho. The elder woman, in her relief, disregards this blazon of the younger’s admiration and instead: ‘Away, away, the flowers I flung / And thee down to my breast I drew’ (*LA*: 22, 11-12). The final stanza is an impassioned affirmation of Sappho’s feelings for the younger woman, sharpened by the possibility and knowledge of potential loss:

My darling! Nay, our very breath  
Nor light nor darkness shall divide;  
Queen Dawn shall find us on one bed,  
Nor must thou flutter from my side  
An instant, lest I feel the dread,  
Atthis, the immanence of death.

The gentle, tactile eroticism of the desire which Sappho feels for Atthis in this instance is barely coded, yet subtly expressed in the rituals and language of close female companionship. The intensity of feeling awoken in Sappho is at once sisterly, maternal, while also being heightened with more than a hint of sexual attraction, even activity, between the two. They both lie side by side on one bed, where they are close enough for their breath to mingle: a powerful metaphor for the close union between the two which neither light nor darkness can divide, only the threatening abyss of death.

There has been much recent and continuing debate about the nature of the language of female same-sex desire at the end of the nineteenth century. What this work highlights is the true complexity and difficulty of identifying an authentic, self-consciously lesbian discourse of desire at this time. Sheila Jeffreys has noted that ‘women wrote about their feelings to each other in ways which nowadays seem quite inappropriate to same-sex friendship’ (Jeffreys 1985: 102). However, Michael Field was writing and publishing this poem at a crossroads in the history of sexuality when the early sexologists were beginning to label and, indeed, create in the Foucauldian sense the ‘species’ (Foucault 1998: 43) of homosexuality through the annexation of certain types of behaviour, appearance and modes of self-expression. It is possible to see ‘XIV’ as a poem about the intensity of female friendship, of the power of the mother-bond between an elder and a younger woman not her daughter, while at the same time expressing same-sex desires in an ambiguously subtle and yet intimately candid manner. The reciprocal love between Sappho and Atthis is by turns physical, maternal, spiritual and aesthetic; it is grounded on a firm base of the rituals of female friendship while containing the possibility of private carnal fulfilment.

Perhaps the most famous poem of the collection, and the most complicated in the expression of Sappho’s romantic/sexual allegiances, is the magnificent ‘XXXIII’:

Maids, not to you my mind doth change;  
Men I defy, allure, estrange,  
Prostrate, make bond or free:  
Soft as the stream beneath the plane  
To you I sing my love’s refrain;  
Between us is no thought of pain,  
Peril, satiety.



Soon doth a lover's patience tire,  
But ye to manifold desire  
Can yield response, ye know  
When for long, museful days I pine  
The presage at my heart divine;  
To you I never breath a sign  
Of inner want or woe.

(LA: 52, 1-14)

Critics of this poem have tended to read it as a manifesto of Sappho's sexual allegiance to other women, of Michael Field's expression of an overtly lesbian poetics. Indeed, even Michael Field's executor Thomas Sturge-Moore, compiling a selected edition of the poetry in 1923 felt the need to omit the second stanza (SP: 68). Yet what occurs within this work is a separation, an annexation of desire between the masculine and the feminine: what Sappho seems to be expressing is that sexual passions, along with their accompanying negative emotions such as jealousy and gradual indifference, will be experienced solely with men, leaving her able to experience the more gentle, romantic side of eros with women, unchangeably, unthreatened, amongst nature where comfort and poetry go hand-in-hand. Chris White has commented on this difference: 'To her maids she is a maternal or passionate lover, and to men she is manipulative and fickle' (White 1990: 200). This is certainly true, but I would extend this argument by saying that she is able to remain un-manipulative and un-fickle to her maids precisely because she does not perceive them as her lovers: 'Soon doth a *lover's* patience tire / *But* ye to manifold desire'. This 'But ye' places the maids in a separate category where whatever does transpire between them – be it passionate, erotic, or otherwise – is not seen as being the activity of *lovers*. It is perhaps safe to say that Bradley and Cooper would have understood the sexual act as being the penile penetration of a woman by a man. Therefore, the act of sex, the act of 'lovers' in this sense, could not take place between two women, regardless of whether or not such activities as did occur would be seen as sexual, or 'lesbian' in a 21<sup>st</sup> century context. Therefore, by another token, what can be seen as a repudiation of same-sex desire is a playful, perhaps not wholly deliberate, cover for female homoeroticism. The maids are not seen as lovers in the traditional sense, but they can 'yield' – not so innocent a term in Mary Robinson's sense – to 'manifold desire' in ways which the male lovers simply cannot.

Yopie Prins has noted in relation to this poem: ‘While men are merely acted upon, women are actively desiring subjects’ (Prins 1999a: 105). Whether or not the maids are ‘acted upon’ in their turn, Prins is right in detecting the emotional disunity in the feelings expressed for men and those for women. But this remains, like so many of the pieces in this volume, a poem of double-exposure: in one way it can be seen as a poem which denies the possibility of sexual activity between women, while from another angle it suggests the opposite, simply because Michael Field’s lexicon of sexual desire is so amorphous, so fluid. Female same-sex desire spectrally appears and disappears, tantalisingly triggering and then slipping below the radar. It is incorrect to see this poem as a direct manifesto for lesbian sexuality, but it is equally misguided to see it as a repudiation of all possibility of homosexual activity. Ironically, the poem becomes even more homoerotic if the speaker behind Sappho is seen to be the male ‘Michael Field’, uttered through the apparent safety of the feminine mask: ‘Men I defy, allure, estrange, / Prostrate, make bond or free’. Such a beautifully executed, disarmingly simplistic lyric continually and suggestively opens layer after layer of interpretive possibility; ‘manifold desire’ is the end of this Sappho’s quest, not merely aspects of it, which is all one gender, one identity alone, can offer.

As the previous poem shows, there is little reference to direct physical congress being considered between Sappho and her female followers in the way that there is towards Phaon. Yet what emerges is a voyeuristic quality, an aesthetic appreciation of the female form, which, if not homosexual, is certainly homoerotic, as in ‘XXXV’: ‘Come Gorgo, put the rug in place, / And passionate recline; / I love to see thee in thy grace, / Dark, virulent, divine’ (*LA*: 56, l. 1-4). Sappho values the alluring repose of Gorgo for the beauty of her in this specific attitude: to touch, or even to attempt to touch the vision of beauty would be to spoil its effect. In ‘XXVII’ occurs a similar moment, almost of epiphany, when Sappho is struck suddenly by the beauty of one of her followers:

But when Mnasidica doth raise  
Her arm to feed the lamp I gaze  
Glad at the lovely curve;  
And when her pitcher at the spring  
She fills, I watch her tresses swerve  
And drip, then pause to see her wring  
Her hair, and back the bright drops fling.

The visual quality of this stanza is astonishing: the attention to detail, as Sappho's eye records each curve and movement, lovingly caresses the woman who remains seemingly indifferent to – or playfully complicit in – being watched. If Sappho's women do remain untouched, if they are denied a literal laying on of hands, then they are held apart in Sappho's field/'Field' of vision, venerated and fondled by the extolling power of the elder woman's gaze.

What emerges in the poems to and about Sappho's maids is the essentiality of a female space, created by this emotional distance from men, and strengthened through the appreciative medium of the female gaze. Desire for the male may be essential, but it is by nature as destructive as it is pleasurable, hence the need for retirement, a place where fellow-feeling, contact with nature, all heightened by the subtle attraction of the younger female, can be affirmed, as in 'XLIII':

Cool water gurgles through  
The apple boughs, and sleep  
Falls from the flickering leaves,  
Where hoary shadows keep  
Secluded from man's view  
A little cave that cleaves  
The rock with fissure deep.

Worshipped with milk and oil,  
There dwell the Nymphs, and there  
They listen to the breeze,  
About their dewey hair  
The clustered garlands coil,  
Or, moving round the trees,  
Cherish the roots with care.

There reign delight and health;  
There freshness yields the palm  
To musical refrain;  
For never was such calm,  
Such sound of murmuring stealth,  
Such solace to the brain,  
To weariness such balm.

Even a lover's pains,  
Though fiercely they have raged,  
Here find at last relief:  
The heart by sorrow aged  
Divinely youth regains;

Tears steal through parched grief:  
All passion is assuaged.

(LA: 68-9)

The Nymphs who dwell in the cleft of the rock are in absolute harmony with their surroundings: they listen to the vicissitudes of the breeze, bathe their hair in dew, and in return they repay Nature for her bounties through the nurturing of the roots of the trees. This landscape and all female society is in turn characterised by ‘health’ and ‘freshness’: the resultant ‘musical refrain’ of poetry which arises effortlessly and purely from the innocent female youth is free from the bounds of societal forces, domestic duties, even the encumbrance of shame. Michael Field’s poem has two main sources of inspiration, one is fragment four from Wharton’s edition: ‘And round the cool [water] gurgles through apple-boughs, and slumber streams from quivering leaves’ (Wharton 1885: 66). The other is Baudelaire’s poem ‘Lesbos’ from *Les Fleurs du Mal*: ‘Lesbos, where love is like the wild cascades / That throw themselves into the deepest gulfs, / And twist and run with gurglings and with sobs, / Stormy and secret, swarming underground; / Lesbos, where love is like the wild cascades’ (Baudelaire 1998: 235). Baudelaire’s Sapphic landscape is the same as Wharton’s and Michael Field’s, yet he invests it with a steamy, sultry atmosphere of ‘languid nights’ and ‘sterile fantasies’. This is at odds with the cool, cleanly replenishment which Michael Field finds in the original. For Baudelaire, the homosexuality of Sappho and the women of Lesbos is what makes them monstrous, and therefore so infinitely fascinating: they represent a moral extreme, a form of desire which must remain forever frustrated, forever ‘sterile’ and driven to extremity through the women’s inability to sate this lust through penetration. Within Michael Field’s poem, a semantic field of freshness and natural renewal is evoked to counterbalance the bleak dead-end of same-sex passion inherent within the exploitative language of Baudelaire. Where he creates an almost Dantean vision of lesbian hell, Michael Field linguistically salvages and reshapes an aesthetic paradise, a textual and imaginative space for acceptance, renewal, and connection with nature, and, ultimately, the muse.

Moreover this muse, alternately male, though predominantly female, must remain forever young. It is through the medium of the young maids that Sappho can feel again the passions of her youth and retain a close affinity with nature. Such sentiments are to be found echoed in an article called ‘Mid-Age’, published in *The Contemporary Review* in 1889 under the name of Michael Field, which has all the

feeling of an abandoned preface to *Long Ago*: ‘Thus crowned and mitred we enjoy a period when the earthly paradise presents enchantments without peril, when we may be left awhile safely to ourselves, to follow our imperious instincts and most immediate desires; in mood to receive as crowning favour of our soul’s mistress “a corollary”’ (Field 1889: 432). Michael Field’s Sappho is not a young woman scorned by her first lover and suffering under the indifference of society to her songs, she is a woman in her middle age, with experience, fame and numerous achievements, able to live again her youth through the calm contemplation which middle age allows, while still remaining susceptible to the powerful temptations and passions of youthful desires. *Long Ago* enacts this philosophy, while touchingly demonstrating the severe vulnerability which still remains, regardless of life experience.

What emerges from the poems to the young women, allied with those about Phaon and Alcaeus, is not a Sappho who is exclusively heterosexual or homosexual, but rather of a more inclusively bi-sexual sensibility, able to communicate and experience ‘manifold desire’. In ‘XXIV’ Sappho illustrates this brilliantly through her position as public poet, performing works to order, which express the love of the female to the male, and vice-versa:

To me the tender, blushing bride  
Doth come with lips that fail;  
I feel her heart beat at my side,  
And cry – ‘Like Ares in his pride,  
Hail, noble bridegroom, hail!’

And to the doubting boy afraid  
Of too ambitious bliss  
I whisper – ‘None is like thy maid,  
And I her fond heart will persuade  
To feel thou feelest this.’

(LA: 35-6, 11-20)

It is Sappho’s voice which seduces the man through the proxy of his young bride, as well as courting the young woman under the cover of her callow male admirer. Swinburne stated that ‘great poets are bisexual; male and female at once’ (Swinburne in Dellamora 1990: 69). This is certainly applicable to Michael Field’s Sappho, as much as it is equally true of Bradley and Cooper, singing and seeing together through the mouth and mask of one man.

## **‘My daughter, when I come to die’**

As has been seen, the feelings directed towards the young women are wide ranging: admiring, caring, aesthetically appreciative and at some levels sexual. However, in all instances the dominant emotional drive is arguably maternal. The trope of motherhood, so central to Bradley and Cooper's formative work both separately and together as Arran and Isla Leigh, is still of optimum importance in the depiction of Sapphic passions of the wide and inclusive spectrum, in the recovery and re-invention of the character of Sappho. But nowhere does this become more apparent – even urgent – than in the closing pages of the collection in the touchingly and intensely haunting poems which invoke or directly address Sappho's actual daughter, Clëis. In 'XLVII', an Epithalamium to a young groom and his bride, it becomes apparent that this is Michael Field's Sappho commemorating the marriage of her daughter. Speaking directly to the groom, she affirms: 'No other girl – O bridegroom, thou art right – / Is like to thine' (*LA*: 76, 1-2). What the man is to gain, and Sappho to lose, is the embodiment of purity, as expressed in the third stanza (a beautiful rendering of fragment 93 from Wharton's edition): 'A blushing apple on the topmost bough, / Heaven kept thy bride / A fragrant, rare, inviolate thing / For reason of thy cherishing' (*LA*: 76, l. 15-18). Clëis, as the paragon of beauty and feminine innocence, is to fulfil this 'blushing', 'fragrant' promise through marriage, to summon her husband 'softly to rejoice' (*LA*: 76, l. 12). Her new husband has proved the one among many worthy and able to reach her at the end of the bough, leaving Sappho, in her mid-age, 'with solitary eyes, afar' (*LA*: 77: 35).

Such mingling of the melancholy and the bitter-sweet is taken to a new dimension in poem ‘LXII’:

My daughter, when I come to die  
Thou shalt not rend thy garb nor cry:  
    Though Hades smite the door,  
        Apollo is within,  
    He whose pure footsteps on the floor  
Would make thy grief and wailing breath a sin.  
*(LA: 114, 1-6)*

There is a sense, not only in the substance but the tone of the poem, which suggests that Sappho knows her death may be near at hand. There is a hint of dramatic irony

for the reader, well versed in the Sappho myth, who already knows that Sappho ended her own life. It is even possible that as she speaks these words to her daughter, this final deed is in her mind. What is of the utmost importance, even urgency at this very moment is that when the time comes, her daughter feels the minimum amount of grief. What matters most is the continuation of the love that they once shared, enshrined in memories of far happier times:

Mortals, fore-doomed, must pass away:  
O Clëis the beloved, why stay  
Shut in the dark and spend  
Vain hours of sodden gloom  
Because my life has reached its end,  
And mourners pour libations at my tomb?

Why from the happy fields in sloth  
Withdraw thy feet, as thou wert loth  
That thought of me should mix  
With sun and living air;  
Why must the melancholy Styx  
Flow round the pleasures we were wont to share?  
(LA: 115, 25-36)

It is of paramount importance to the mother that her daughter does not withdraw from nature, the very scenes and environment which enshrined their life together, in order to indulge in a form of death-in-life. Although the poem foreshadows the death of Sappho, ushering in a feeling of chill resignation, it is nonetheless a moving display of the unbreakable, inviolable bond between mother and daughter, or even female lovers. What matters is the sanctity of this memory, the knowledge of a life lived fully if not always wisely, and the endurance of the poetry which every joy and folly occasioned:

My child, I give the grave small thought,  
For I have sung and loved, and nought  
Can make the years obscure  
In which I drew warm breath;  
My dark-leaved laurels will endure,  
And I shall walk in grandeur till my death.  
(LA: 115, 37-42)

What this poem occasions is a gradual change in tone from the more ebullient middle section to a more emotionally fraught yet defiant position. Francis O’Gorman sees

the collection as being ‘attracted to lament’ (O’Gorman 2006: 650). While definitely being a concern of the sequence, as O’Gorman asserts, it is by no means the central, dominant tone; when it occurs, the lament always carries at the very centre of grief and desperation a feeling of affirmation, of survival of some sort. It is apparent in ‘LXII’ that although Sappho is preparing for the end of her life, she finds solace in the knowledge that she will endure doubly in the legacy of her poetry, and in what she leaves behind in the bosom of her daughter, and the sundry daughters who made up her train of maidens.

But quickly following this moment of staunch affirmation, the feelings which Sappho harboured for Phaon re-appear – Michael Field’s Sappho is again haunted by the returning ghost of heterosexual desire. This time though, all the tantalising joy once found in flirtatious rejection has soured, leaving destruction and embitterment in its wake. In ‘LXIII’, Sappho has lost the ability to make song: ‘To me, alas, my lyre no music makes’ (*LA*: 117, 22). In the following poem, it is while Sappho is sitting on a wayside tomb with some of her maids that she hears Phaon has abandoned her by leaving for Sicily. ‘LXVIII’ is the culmination of Sappho’s frustrated anger, in it she wishes for Damophyla, one of her followers, to learn her music so Phaon can be made to suffer once she is dead: ‘Will Damophyla [...] / Singing how Sappho of thy love despaired, / Till thou dost burn, / While I, / Eros! am quenched within my urn?’ (*LA*: 127, 19-24). This is the final poem in the numerical sequence, and although it ends upon a question, and although Sappho has ultimately failed to win Phaon, there is triumph in the possibility that he may be made to know the extent of her feelings, and to repent. The note of triumph through vengeance is unmistakeable. The interesting thing is that the concluding poem which deals with Sappho’s leap from Leucadia is denied a number: it is literally not a part of the sequence. It is not even allotted a page number in the original printed text of 1889. As Margaret Reynolds has noted, it occurs outside the frame of the narrative (Reynolds 2003: 135). Therefore, this last act of suicide is literally not an event within the life of Sappho as Michael Field envisions it. Given the strength and resilience which Michael Field’s Sappho has exhibited up until this point, it is hard to imagine her being capable of such an act. Like the probable Sappho of history, it feels as though she was destined to die in old age, or at least from causes other than these: ‘O free me, for I take the leap, / Apollo, from thy snowy steep / Song did’st thou give me, and there fell / O’er Hellas an enchanter’s spell’ (*LA*: 128, 1-4). This reads like a rather bad parody of L.E.L.;



with the strict, chiming full-rhymes, it is almost Sappho's suicide by numbers. It neither moves, nor fully convinces. John Miller Gray, in his glowing review of the collection in *The Academy* of 1889 was driven to comment: 'the only blemish in the book [...] is its final poem, one distinctly unfortunate in the minor key in which it is set, and forming no satisfying or effectively dramatic culmination to the lyrical sequence which it closes' (Gray 1889: 389). And yet the poem appears as a final *auto-de-fe*, a nod of allegiance in the direction of the accepted pattern of the Sapphic myth, while at the same time being kept separate, detached from the main flow of the narrative. In the end these may – or arguably may not – be taken to be Michael Field's favoured last words of Sappho.

**'My dark leaved laurels will endure'**

Highlighting one of the central paradoxes of *Long Ago*, Yopie Prins has questioned: 'How shall we read these poems written by two women writing as a man writing as Sappho?' (Prins 1999a: 74). It is a question which serves to open up more speculation than it yields answers: what is the overall effect on the volume of the name Michael Field? Is this a covert work of homosexual expression by two women, or is it a more overtly homosexual collection written by a man? And was this at all intentional on the behalf of Bradley and Cooper? Indeed, what may appear to be one of the first examples of women using Sappho to express lesbian platitudes can also be seen in the light of male Sapphic writing where – as with Tennyson and Swinburne – Sappho acts as textual influence as well as allowing for the expression of transgressive desires through the distancing safety of a feminine mask.

In reflection, what attracted Bradley and Cooper to resurrect Sappho was not the exclusivity of an authentic lesbian voice in the sexual sense, but rather Sappho's ability to open up the whole range of human desires, to demonstrate the 'fearful mastery of love' (*LA*: ix) in all its 'manifold' manifestations, within the body of one individual. They incorporate the full spectrum of Sapphic passion as exhibited in the original fragments which is, after all, neither heterosexual nor homosexual, but expressive of all modes, positive and negative, of romantic and erotic feeling, what Thain terms 'an area between categories' (Thain 2007b: 63). This is demonstrated in a Sapphic fragment, found in the first decade of the twentieth century and therefore not present in H. T. Wharton's edition:

Some say an army on horseback, some an army on foot,  
and some say a fleet of ships is the loveliest sight  
on this dark earth; but I say it is what-  
ever you desire:

and it is perfectly possible to make this clear  
to all . . . .

(Balmer 1999: 39, 1-6)

What Bradley and Cooper create and present through the studied persona of Michael Field is a bisexual poetic sensibility, a personality capable of exploring all aspects of human emotion, from the male and female perspective, as well as the heterosexual and the homosexual. As Prins affirms: ‘simultaneously single and double, masculine and feminine, Michael Field’s Sappho is a name that opens itself to multiple readings’ (Prins 1999a: 74). In this way, Michael Field takes on a life of his own: like Sappho, he has become the ideal medium, the perfect poetic mouth-piece.

This is made concrete in the book through the presentation of the myth of Tiresias in ‘LII’. Tiresias is to be found nowhere in the extant works of Sappho, but his/her incorporation is wholly appropriate:

Ah, not in Erinny’s ground  
Experience so dire were found  
As that to the enchanter known  
When womanhood was round him thrown:  
He trembled at the quickening change,  
He trembled at his vision’s range,  
His finer senses for bliss and dole,  
His receptivity of soul;  
But when love came, and, loving back,  
He learnt the pleasure men must lack,  
It seemed that he had broken free  
Almost from his mortality.

(LA: 89-90, 9-20)

The female experience of sex and love is depicted as purer and more fulfilling than the masculine experience; female love always offers more plenitude while male love contains an added sense of threat. But neither is really promoted over the other. The man and the woman clash when they meet in their separate bodies, but, as one flesh, they temper and complement each other, as in the body of Tiresias, and the textual body of Michael Field.

Sadly, the effect which the persona of ‘Michael Field’ was intended to have was diluted. By the time that the volume emerged, the majority of their friends and their reviewers were in upon the secret. Even Michael Field’s closest and most trusted admirer at this time, John Miller Gray – who, as Joseph Bristow has recently displayed, helped the creation of *Long Ago* at an intimate level (Bristow 2007: 50) – did not even bother to keep up the pretence of masculine authorship: ‘The readers of Michael Field already know that *she* possesses much of lyric power’ (Gray 1889: 388), (emphasis mine). A letter from Walter Pater on 4 July 1889, acknowledging receipt of a complimentary copy of the book, where he remarks on the ‘dramatic aim and power’ of the sequence (Pater 1970: 158), opens with a teasing gambit to what will become an otherwise supportive friendship: ‘Dear Sir, (I suppose I must say,)’ (Pater 1970:157). Although ‘Michael Field’ was known, by and large, not to have written the lyrics when they appeared, the book sealed the start of Bradley and Cooper’s reception as Michael Field the poet. It won them praise and vital contacts. Although they would never again achieve such ready praise, *Long Ago* proved a solid bedrock on which to build the forms, themes and aesthetics of their successive poetic collections.

And, I would suggest, it would achieve even more than this. As one of the first books to react to Wharton’s resurrected Sappho, it came at the forefront of a general re-appraisal and re-assimilation of the Sapphic voice in English and American poetry. This would continue in the new century with writers such as H.D., Djuna Barnes, and Natalie Clifford Barney who used Wharton as a direct influence. Although never cited by these later writers, the subtle influence of Michael Field’s Sapphics can sometimes be felt hovering obliquely in the imagery and cadences of Sapphic Modernism, as in H.D.’s *Hymen* (1921):

There with his honey seeking lips  
The bee clings close and warmly sips,  
And seeks with honey-thighs to sway  
And drink the very flower away.

(Ah, stern the petals drawing back;  
Ah rare, ah virginal her breath!)

Crimson, with honey-seeking lips,  
The sun lies hot across his back,  
The gold is flecked across his wings.

Quivering he sways and quivering clings  
(Ah, rare her shoulders drawing back!)  
One moment, then the plunderer slips  
Between the purple flower-lips.

(H.D. 1986: 109)

Sappho as ideal lyric poet, as the template for an all-inclusive desire remained, as will be seen, a recurring trope in the successive poetic productions of Michael Field. In answer to Prins' question, we may read this collaboration and this literary experiment in any way we wish, from whatever perspective we come to it. In the words of Angela Leighton this was 'a new language of desire, one that is surprisingly open, sensual and without any overlay of moral virtue or moral guilt' (Leighton 1992: 208-9). It is the openness of the pieces which is their greatest quality; continually along with 'Michael Field', they slip and elide any attempts at definitive categorisation. As broken voice, tainted echo endlessly translated, deformed, reformed, transmuted, polluted, refined and reinvented, Sappho lives again in the 'audacious' translations of Bradley and Cooper and the one 'male' voice they lift in unison to fill the gaps of Sappho's textual ellipses. Michael Field puts an end to the melancholy, lachrymose Sapphism of Post-Romanticism, and initiates the groundwork for Sapphic Modernism.

### **Chapter 3. ‘Implicating Eyes’: The Poetics and Sexual Politics of Ekphrasis in *Sight and Song* (1892)**

*Sight and Song* was a project on a grand scale, a conceptual experiment, a calculated aesthetic risk, which, like its predecessor *Long Ago* was to be another translation. This time, however, the source for these poems was not textual but visual, as the enigmatic, quirky ‘Preface’ makes clear: ‘The aim of this little volume is, as far as may be, to translate into verse what the lines and colours of certain chosen pictures sing in themselves’ (SS: v). The research for this task – which involved scouring many famous galleries and private collections – entailed extensive excursions to Europe in the summers of 1890 and 1891, and an increasing intimacy with the forthright theories and personalities of Walter Pater and the young American art scholar, Bernard Berenson. The actual groundwork entailed laborious hours spent in front of Grand Master paintings, recording descriptions of the various different works which caught their eye, as well as their immediate emotional and intellectual reactions. These prose ekphrases were written directly into the journal to act as an aide-memoir when it came to composing the actual poems. In many cases, these prose descriptions, varying in detail and length, form an early first drafting stage for the final poetic work.

This method of recording art was not an uncommon practice in the nineteenth century, when prints and reproductions were rare and expensive. Indeed, it is an activity which Bradley had indulged in her youth, as the journal of her formative stay in France between 1868-9 illustrates. Nor was *Sight and Song* the first time that Bradley and Cooper had engaged with poetic ekphrasis. In *Bellerophon* – as discussed in the first chapter – there is the poem ‘Adônîs and Aphrodîtê’ which is based upon Titian’s painting of the same title. Moreover, there is a small yet significant poetic experiment within the pages of the joint journal in 1888, when the sensibility of Michael Field hung between two different aesthetic modes of translation: the verbal and the visual. Following a viewing of Lawrence Alma-Tadema’s *The Roses of Heliogabalus*, Bradley wrote on 9 May: ‘On Monday I had seen at the Academy *The Roses of Heliogabalus* and was full of a fervour to crown the rose with praise.’ The resulting poem (on the same page) is entitled ‘A Crown of Praise’:

What are these roses like? Oh, they are rare,  
 So balmy pink  
 I will not shrink  
 Them to the graces to compare,  
 When in gay dance the laughing triad link,  
 When the round, lifted arms are bare,  
 And just about  
 The elbow's pout  
 The warm flesh glows  
 Into a flower – incomparable rose:  
 Such fluctuating stealth  
 Of light doth interfuse  
 Their virgin health,  
 In its soft bouyance, as indues  
 You, O ye Roses, with your heavenly hues.<sup>26</sup>

Tadema's canvas is an immense representation of the popular story of the corrupt Emperor Heliogabalus killing his guests at a party by having them gradually buried under piles of poisoned rose and violet petals, dropped from a cavity in the ceiling. The poem, starting with the image of the roses in Tadema's painting, embarks upon a startling visual reverie, moving between and melding together the images of the roses and the imagined poise of the three graces. Little attempt, if any, is made to reproduce the visual contents or narrative of the original image, rather, all attention is paid to recording the freely-associative images which pass and cross in the subjective flux of the observer's imagination. I will return to this poem shortly, but it is important to see the composition of it as an important aesthetic turning-point. Eventually, it was stripped of its title, apportioned a fragment of Sapphic text as a prefix,<sup>27</sup> and was placed towards the end of *Long Ago* as 'LVIII'. Therefore, its status as a poem which hovers between textual and visual interpretation, as a radical ekphrastic experiment, is easily overlooked.

The ekphrases in *Sight and Song* are dealt with more programmatically and theoretically. The work which Michael Field completed and presented to the world in 1892 after three years of research stands as one of the most significant extended works of ekphrasis from the second half of the nineteenth century. This work has

<sup>26</sup> Field, Michael. BL. Add. MS. 46777, 1888-9, fol. 4r

<sup>27</sup> 'O fair, O lovely ...' (Wharton 1885: 120).

endured in the minds of Michael Field critics more than any other single book.<sup>28</sup> If the Sapphic work placed Bradley and Cooper in the context of women poets from earlier in the century, then this project aimed to place them firmly at the forefront of the aesthetic avant-garde. Julia Saville goes as far as to see it as engendering a ‘determination to engage shoulder to shoulder in debate with leading male intellectuals of an avant-garde, *fin de siècle* culture’ (Saville 2005: 178).

In this chapter I will cover a number of issues. I intend to focus in the first part of the chapter on *Sight and Song* and the ways in which it functions as a work of subjective/objective ekphrasis. Then, while still bearing these issues in mind, I will move on to a more thematic discussion of the ways in which the ‘certain chosen pictures’ continue the fascination of Bradley and Cooper’s earlier verse collections with the relations between the sexes and the complexities of representing sexuality and gender in a written or verbal medium.

### **Ekphrastic Contexts, Paterian Subjectivity**

In the words of Martine Lambert-Charbonnier, ekphrasis literally ‘means “description” in Greek and in particular the description of real or imaginary artistic objects’ (Lambert-Charbonnier 2002: 203). It is certainly true, as James W. Heffernan notes, that in recent years ‘the study of the relation between literature and the visual arts has become a major intellectual industry’ (Heffernan 1993 [2004]: 1). This is supported by the growing amount of work, both critical and theoretical, which deals with the relation between the verbal and the visual, concepts of the observer and the object observed, as well as the gendered nature of the gaze. This intellectual industry can be seen as having its roots in Jean Hagstrum’s pioneering *The Sister Arts: The Tradition of Literary Pictorialism from Dryden to Gray* (1958). This study is interesting for the close attention which it pays to the interchangeability between poetry and painting as ‘good art also imitates other art, both in the same and other media’ (Hagstrum 1958: xx). But what interests him most is not necessarily the ways in which certain poems and poets imitate specific paintings – attempting to translate them into another medium – but more generally how the visual aspects of poetry in

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<sup>28</sup> Ana Parejo Vadillo, Jill Ehnenn and Julia F. Saville have recently championed this work. In the recent collection *Michael Field and Their World* (2007) (eds.) Margaret D. Stetz and Cheryl A. Wilson, no fewer than three essays deal with this collection alone (more than any other), with many more drawing reference to it.

the 17<sup>th</sup> century and beyond were achieved from an intense knowledge of the practices of the visual arts. Indeed, the word ekphrasis never really features; the main focus is what Hagstrum terms ‘pictorialism’: ‘In order to be called “pictorial” a description or an image must be, in its essentials, capable of translating into painting or some other visual art. It need not resemble a particular painting or even a school of painting. But its leading details and their manner and order of presentation must be imaginable as a painting or sculpture’ (Hagstrum 1958: xxi-xxii). This may not be translation proper, but it is a form of translation nonetheless. The significance of Hagstrum’s work which truly transcends the period of his focus is the light that it sheds upon the complex vicissitudes between the verbal and visual arts and the importance that is placed on the visual quality of the poems which emulate or treat literal or figurative artistic objects.

One of the most important recent commentators on ekphrastic study is John Hollander. His extensive introductory essay to *The Gazer’s Spirit: Poems Speaking to Silent Works of Art* (1995) sets out to provide certain theoretical and formal criteria for categorising and analysing ekphrastic poetry. He identifies the start of the nineteenth century as the time from which ekphrastic verse moves towards expressing ‘the poet’s experience of encountering the work of art’ (Hollander 1995: xi). This is the beginning of the movement away from pure pictorialism, to something more encompassing which takes into account the wider subjective experience of a personality encountering and reacting to a static work of art. Importantly, Hollander defines two main types of ekphrasis, the ‘notional’ and the ‘actual’. Notional ekphrases deal with imaginary works of art, and feature in many famous novels of the period. Actual ekphrasis, as the term implies, is the attempt to recreate actual works:

....actual ekphrastic [sic] poems entail engagements with particular and identifiable works of art, and they are obviously of great interest when the works so addressed are still extant. Particularly in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries there is a good deal of such poetry, addressing a wide range of good and bad, great and obscure, unglossed or overinterpreted works of art, and taking up a range of stances towards their objects. These include addressing the image, making it speak, speaking of it interpretively, meditating upon the moment of viewing it, and so forth.

(Hollander 1995: 4)



Therefore, the role of the poetic translator of the visual image has a great deal of freedom within this fairly amorphous tradition; rather than simply recording pictorial detail in words, the poet can give the image voice, invoke it, question its meaning and, in some instances, give it movement.

James A. W. Heffernan, in his magisterial work *Museum of Words: The Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashbery* (1993), enriches the study of ekphrastic poetry by highlighting the fascinating thematic and aesthetic tensions which can arise from what amounts essentially to a struggle between two forms of artistic representation: 'Ekphrasis speaks not only *about* works of art but also *to* and *for* them. In so doing, it stages – within the theatre of language itself – a revolution of the image against the word' (Heffernan 1993 [2004]: 7). The struggle within ekphrasis for the power of representation is also seen as being a strongly gendered struggle, it is 'a duel between male and female gazes, the voice of male speech striving to control a female image that is both alluring and threatening, of male narrative striving to overcome the fixating impact of beauty poised in space' (Heffernan 1993 [2004]: 1). Ekphrastic poetry or prose in the nineteenth century commonly involves a masculine voice controlling, shaping – even violating – the powerless feminine image.

These theories of ekphrasis, as will be made clear, are all relevant to and revealing of Michael Field's engagement with the practice of translating the visual object into a verbal medium. Each one of the poems in *Sight and Song* falls into the category of actual ekphrasis. On the surface, they do appear to be rather straightforward descriptions of famous paintings, with little formal experimentation; it certainly does not appear to be a particularly innovative or important work. However, as Heffernan shows, the real interest in the ekphrastic process derives from the struggle between the poem and the original image. Not to mention the complicating gendered struggle for the gaze, further complicated by Bradley and Cooper's dual femininity, which is in turn compromised by Michael Field's singularity and 'his' masculinity.

As Hollander acknowledges, the nineteenth century saw a fundamental change in the relationship between what Ruskin termed the 'sister arts'. In William Blake, for example, the word and the image, as in earlier illuminated manuscripts, are closely aligned as the text is worked into the visual image. It is with Keats though, and the 'Ode on a Grecian Urn', that the nineteenth century ekphrastic poem is truly born. Here, the actual experience of the poet/viewer looking at and encountering the work

of art that is being described becomes a central part of the aesthetic experience of writing and reading the poem; as Jeffrey Prince notes: ‘As the desire to preserve the special moment grew increasingly obsessive, the plastic arts again became a model for the poet. [...] they remained as a perpetual invitation for the spectator to repeat the artist’s act of contemplation and thus recover the special moment’ (Prince 1976: 568).

Nineteenth-century ekphrastic poetics was to find its greatest practitioner in Dante Gabriel Rossetti. As both painter and poet, he was uniquely able to explore the complex relations between both media. It is possible to identify three different modes of actual ekphrasis which he practises. Algernon Charles Swinburne is another major exponent of ekphrasis. In his case, however, it was a less obvious art form than it is in Rossetti: his ekphrastic works do not declare themselves as such.<sup>29</sup> Quite often the title of the painting which inspires them is not included at the start of the text. What Swinburne is interested in is the dramatic scenario of the tableau, whether it is of a solitary woman, a young man and woman embracing, or a statue or old cameo. What the painting allows is a readily created model of desire for the poetic persona to adopt/adapt and slip into. What makes his ekphrastic poems so effective, so dramatically charged, is perhaps their very infidelity to the original visual image.

The greatest influence, not only on Michael Field but on late nineteenth-century ekphrasis in general was the criticism of Walter Pater. The ‘Introduction’ to *The Renaissance* offers what amounts to a manifesto of heightened subjectivity in approaching art and attempting to recreate its particular effects in aesthetic prose:

‘To see the object as in itself it really is,’ has been justly said to be the aim of all true criticism whatever; and in æsthetic criticism the first step towards seeing one’s object as it really is, is to know one’s own impression as it really is, to discriminate it, to realise it distinctly. [...] What is this song or picture, this engaging personality presented in life or in a book, to *me*? what effect does it really produce on me? does it give me pleasure? and if so, what sort or degree of pleasure? How is my nature modified by its presence, and under its influence?

(Pater 1980: xix-xx)

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<sup>29</sup> Key examples from *Poems and Ballads, First Series* are: ‘Hermaphroditus’; ‘A Cameo’; ‘Before the Mirror’ and ‘Erotion’ (Swinburne 1904: 79-81, 113, 129-31, & 132-3).

The succeeding essays in Pater's text are replete with ekphrases of paintings by Botticelli, Giorgione, and, most notoriously, Leonardo da Vinci. Arguably the most famous passage in the whole Pater oeuvre – a description of the *Mona Lisa* – is a vibrant, poetically charged enactment of his own subjective critical credo:

She is older than the rocks among which she sits; like the vampire, she has been dead many times, and learned the secrets of the grave; and has been a diver in deep seas, and keeps their fallen day about her; and trafficked for strange webs with Eastern merchants; and, as Leda, was the mother of Helen of Troy, and, as Saint Anne, the mother of Mary; and all this has been to her but as the sound of lyres and flutes, and lives only in the delicacy with which it has moulded the changing lineaments, and tinged the eyelids and the hands.

(Pater 1980: 99)

The description is astonishingly seductive and affecting, but its visual content contains nothing that could be said to even loosely constitute a direct description of da Vinci's painting. If it were not for the passage's context it would be difficult to say which (if any) painting he was evoking. Pater embarks on a freely-associative, poetic outpouring of personal responses: this is what the *Mona Lisa* evokes within *his* mind and sensibility; this is what the painting means to *him*, this is how it makes *him* feel and think. It is a prose ekphrasis which hovers brilliantly and teasingly between the notional and the actual. It may not be a universal response, yet it is not intended as such. Ana Parejo Vadillo has argued that Pater's subjectivity stifles the freedom of other observers as much as it potentially liberates them: 'Pater's epistemology denies the subjectivity of others by placing *his* impressions at the centre of the aesthetic experience' (Vadillo 2005: 187, emphasis in original). But what Pater actually proves is that such a notion of objective aesthetic response is not possible, nor would it be particularly desirable or valuable. Regarding this passage Angela Leighton has commented: 'What passes through the picture is a movie of history [...] a passing panorama of time [...] the way that Pater reads the *Mona Lisa* almost unframes it altogether, leaving no dividing line between the work of art and the swimmingly impressionistic memories it inspires' (Leighton 2002: 16-17). The true worth of Pater's subjectivity is that he allows others, through his own example, the confidence to react to art in *their* own way, to trust *their* emotions, and to place *their* personal

experience at the heart of viewing the aesthetic object and recreating this experience in a new medium.

Now, looking back to Michael Field's 'Crown of Praise' it is possible to see the same aesthetic approach within the very narrow limits of this small poem. Opening with the image of the roses, which permeate the foreground of Alma-Tadema's vast canvas, the speaker moves in contemplation from them to the rose-coloured flesh of the three graces, who, it is first implied, are not worthy to be compared to such rare blooms: 'I will not shrink them / to the graces to compare'. Through dwelling on the 'gay dance' of the three women and their exposed arms, the speaker comes back to the image of the 'incomparable rose'. The light which falls upon the virgin flesh of the graces is the same light which endows the roses with their 'heavenly hues'. Starting with the roses from the Tadema painting, Michael Field moves through a series of images which invoke other works of art that depict the graces. Iconic works such as Botticelli's *Primavera* and Anton Canova's famous statue are not named, nor are they described, but the outlines of their images cascade through the flowing, diaphanous lines of the poem: 'in gay dance the laughing triad link, / When the round, lifted arms are bare, / And just about / The elbow's pout / The warm flesh glows'. Little allegiance is paid to the Tadema painting, but the falling, poisoned petals, lifted as it were from the canvas, find their movement – along with a certain 'stealth' – in the rhythms and fluctuating form of the poem, as well as in the 'gay dance' of the three women. No attempt is made to render the visuality or the narrative theme of the Heliogabalus tale or painting into the text of the poem. Instead, it leads the reader into a proto stream-of-consciousness trail of aesthetic connotations and free-associations – from the moving pink rose petals to dancing graces to warm flesh and then back again to the graces – which take into consideration the assimilated visuals of other iconic works of art. 'A Crown of Praise' – if not a Paterian movie of history – becomes Michael Field's kaleidoscopic slide-show of feminine sexuality in nature and art. This poem is an extreme example of ekphrastic experimentation which would be eschewed in the more systematic studies in *Sight and Song*. Nevertheless, it demonstrates the centrality of Pater to Michael Field's conception of the visual, as well as the importance of sexuality, gender and physicality in Michael Field's appreciation and appropriation of aestheticism and Renaissance art.

### Ekphrastic Strategies in *Sight and Song*

At the opening of *Sight and Song* Michael Field places a short ‘Preface’, laying out the supposed intentions behind the volume:

The aim of this little volume is, as far as may be, to translate into verse what the lines and colours of certain chosen pictures sing in themselves; to express not so much what these pictures are to the poet, but rather what poetry they objectively incarnate. Such an attempt demands patient, continuous sight as pure as the gazer can refine it of theory, fancies, or his mere subjective enjoyment.

‘Il faut, par un effort d’esprit, se transporter dans les personages et non les attirer à soi.’ For *personages* substitute *peintures*, and this sentence from Gustave Flaubert’s ‘Correspondence’ resumes the method of art-study from which these poems arose.

Not even ‘le grand Gustave’ could ultimately illude [sic] himself as a formative power in his work – not after the pain of a lifetime directed to no other end. Yet the effort to see things from their own centre, but suppressing the habitual centralisation of the visible in ourselves, is a process by which we eliminate our idiosyncrasies and obtain an impression clearer, less passive, more intimate.

When such effort has been made, honestly and with persistence, even then the inevitable force of individuality must still have play and a temperament mould the purified impression: –

‘When your eyes have done their part,  
Thought must length it in the heart.’

(SS: v-vi)

The majority of critics who deal with *Sight and Song* have chosen to see this as a movement away from subjective engagement with the aesthetic object. In particular, Ana Parejo Vadillo sees it as a repudiation of Paterian allegiances; she hones in upon the word ‘translation’, a more systematic mode than recording personal impressions, as the key which ‘allowed Michael Field to theorise the visual and to bring into question the sensorial epistemology advocated by Pater’ (Vadillo 2005: 180). And yet, even within this Preface is the admission that at some point there must be a degree of subjective intervention, some shaping by the personality of the creator – however much it is muted – in order for the translation of the poetic to be possible. Moreover, I believe along with Julia Saville that the poems in *Sight and Song* display a far greater allegiance to Pater than this preface and its analysts have tended to

allow: ‘I read the austerity of the poetics in *Sight and Song* as Michael Field’s experiment in poetic withholding, learned from Pater’ (Saville 2005: 179). Whatever the Preface says, and no matter how interesting it appears, I believe that bearing it in mind too closely when reading the poems can tend to lead the reader down a blind-alley. It should surely be – to apply the Lawrentian dictum – a case of ‘Never trust the artist. Trust the tale’ (Lawrence 1923 [1971]: 8). No matter how objective or otherwise the finished poems may appear, their subjects were chosen to very specific criteria, to suit personal tastes and project specific themes and ideas. Even the way in which the thirty one poems are ordered is telling, revealing a work, or rather an exhibition of poems, which is far more personal and narrative-oriented than may first meet the eye. In the opening poems of the collection it is possible to see straightaway the innate subjectivity of almost every line as the combined personalities of Bradley, Cooper, and Michael Field work their eyes across the canvas and then order their responses upon the page. In many cases, it is interesting to compare the finished works with the original journal notes; the prose reactions form independent, fully-formed ekphrases in their own right.

The first poem, ‘Watteau’s *L’Indifférent*’, depicts a solitary youth dancing in the shade of some trees:

He dances on a toe  
 As light as Mercury’s:  
*Sweet herald, give thy message!* No,  
 He dances on; the world is his,  
 The sunshine and his wingy hat;  
 His eyes are round  
 Beneath the brim:  
 To merely dance where he is found  
 Is fate to him  
 And he was born for that.

He dances in a cloak  
 Of vermeil and of blue:  
*Gay youngster, underneath the oak,*  
*Come, laugh and love!* In vain we woo;  
 He is a human butterfly; –  
 No soul, no kiss,  
 No glance nor joy!  
 Though old enough for manhood’s bliss,  
 He is a boy,  
 Who dances and must die.  
 (SS: 1-2, emphases in original)

As the opening poem it is not typical of what is to follow. First of all, Watteau is not within the same Renaissance time frame as the rest of the painters, and is not Italian, but French. This is a subtle acknowledgement of Pater who included Watteau in *Imaginary Portraits* (1887) and who saw the typical traits of the Renaissance as not being specific to one strict time period, but permeating far before and beyond the fifteenth century (Pater 1980: 1-3). The poem's relative looseness of form is reminiscent of 'A Crown of Praise', but is not characteristic of the majority of the rest of the poems in *Sight and Song*. The contents of the original, vibrantly coloured painting are not drawn in the poem with any real detail. The first thing that the reader is made aware of is the action of dancing; who is dancing, where, and what he looks like is not immediately apparent. Such details as they occur – 'His eyes are round / Beneath the brim: / To merely dance where he is found / Is fate to him' – are depicted with very thin, sparing strokes of Michael Field's pen. This is aided by the somewhat austere diction which avoids detailed pictorialism yet nevertheless retains a lightness and buoyancy of rhythm and form. Although the poem is not exactly a pictorial representation of the original, it is successful in catching the poetic spirit, the playful dance of the solitary young man. The poem is almost entirely a subjective response, offering all the time rather didactic summations of what the viewer(s) see on the canvas. The comparison with Mercury for example – an external element not in the original – which is brought into the poem demonstrates the presence of a shaping personality which lies behind every line and nuance.

Ultimately, what Michael Field sees within the painting and depicts in the poem is a poise of perfect aesthetic and sexual ambivalence. The boy, dancing to a tune only he can hear, is the perfect emblem of self-fulfilling sexuality, of an aesthetic personality outside of the bounds of societal, sexual and artistic commerce. Indeed, the speaker breaks away from observation and description to offer up a direct communication, to connect with the oblivious dancer, which ultimately proves futile: 'In vain we woo.' The boy, like the static image which contains him, may invite speculation and adoration, but is always bound to remain voiceless, unknowable; as Jill Ehnenn has noted: 'Because his pleasure is for himself alone, he ignores both italicised commands' (Ehnenn 2004: 230). It is the job of the ekphrastic poet – the challenge which the painting lays down – to bridge the gap, to forge a means of verbal communication between the object and the subjective viewer/reader. An

instance of this is found a few years later in A. E. Housman's poem 'LI' from *A Shropshire Lad* (1896). The solitary speaker, lonely and desolate, loiters around a 'Grecian gallery' in London. Halting in front of a Greek statue, he enters upon an imaginary conversation:

Still he stood and eyed me hard,  
An earnest and a grave regard:  
'What, lad, drooping with your lot?  
I too would be where I am not.  
I too survey that endless line  
Of men whose thoughts are not as mine.  
Years, ere you stood up from rest,  
On my neck the collar prest;  
Years, when you lay down your ill,  
I shall stand and bear it still.  
Courage, lad, 'tis not for long:  
Stand, quit you like stone, be strong.'  
So I thought his look would say;  
And light on me my trouble lay,  
And I stept out in flesh and bone  
Manful like the man of stone.  
(Housman 1997: 54-5, 11-26)

The ekphrasis, in so far as it constitutes one, is notional: the statue is not described, but it is assumed that those with prior knowledge will know roughly what it looks like. The voice projected on to this statue is the speaker's. This internal voice reverberates back, almost as an echo rebounding from the marble, representing everything the speaker would wish to hear from an external party, could the statue literally speak, or sympathise. The work of art cannot offer up its own voice, but it can be made to return, as a form of aesthetic ventriloquism, what the viewer/speaker wants to be told: it can invite voices, tease, almost, the observer/poet into verbal action. Housman's speaker is satisfied and comforted by his encounter with the statue. Michael Field, however, gets no such response, positive or otherwise from '*L'indifferent*'. But this is entirely in keeping with the character of the indifferent male in the Watteau painting, the poise of aesthetic detachment, and of pleasure in art for its own sake, which attracts the gaze in the first place. In Housman's poem, the speaker presents himself as eyed 'hard' by the statue: in his own imagination he is equally scrutinised by the static work of art. It is not a particularly comfortable encounter. The communication between viewer and art object is more open here than in Michael Field's '*L'Indifferent*'. Housman's speaker, in his moral and spiritual



desperation, enacts a kind of aesthetic ventriloquism whereby the statue tells him exactly what he needs to hear: meaning is drawn from the viewer and almost pinned onto the artwork. Michael Field, in the ‘gay dance’ of ‘*L’Indifferent*’, celebrates the eternally elusive, coquettish indifference of the aesthetic object, which eternally – and essentially – slips and elides all attempts at drawing a meaning, at making him speak.

Another example from early on in the collection of the way that Michael Field’s Paterian subjectivity shapes their poetic ‘translation’ of a painting can be seen in ‘Correggio’s *Venus, Mercury and Cupid*.’ However, before looking at the poem, it is worthwhile to consider Bradley and Cooper’s first impression of Correggio’s work, written in Cooper’s hand, from the pages of the joint journal:

[...] what a delightful picture it is! Venus is a sylvan Queen, with eyes as wondrously sly as a doe’s, with smiling, undeceived lips, forehead on which are fugitive lights, + womanly white body shaded green with the forest’s verdure. Below her sits Mercury, his dark blue scarf touching her scarf of damask, his olive face bent in assured attention above a wee scholar Cupid bearing his alphabet. The clever young God is teaching the child in default of a flirtation with the reluctant mother. His brows are shaded by a plummy hat of maize-colour, fledged sandals of the same colour bind his feet + legs. The cupid droops his little head of silver curls unwillingly over the parchment – his active body chafes, not without a pliant sweetness, at the attitude it must take for lessons. His winglets grow as humanly as his limbs – blue where they rise from the shoulders + canary at the tips. His mother has wings of darker blueness. Round them are the oaks, the seclusion of the modest woodlands. It is one of the easeful, poignant hours wh: the presence of a child makes possible + serene.<sup>30</sup>

This passage is a remarkably vivid and faithful representation of Correggio’s painting. As a work of actual prose ekphrasis it would be possible to build up a relatively reliable representation of what the original looks like from this description alone. Although the choice of descriptive colour words and the order in which the contents of the picture are described all depend upon the personality of the viewer, there is no attempt to ascribe meaning at this point: only the final line points towards any personal interpretation of the tableau. The actual poem in *Sight and Song*, however, is quite different:

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<sup>30</sup> Field, Michael, BL. Add. MS. 46778, 1890-1, fol. 102r

Here we have the lovely masque  
Of a Venus, in the braid  
Of bright oak-boughs, come to ask  
Hermes will he give a task  
To the little lad beside her,  
Who half hides and half doth guide her.

Can there be indeed good cause  
Cupid should learn other art  
Than his mother's gracious laws?  
Hermes – Oh, the magic straws  
In his hat! – as one that pineth,  
To the pretty babe inclineth.

Oh, the poignant hour serene,  
When sweet Love that is a child,  
When sweet Cupid comes between  
Troubled lovers as a screen,  
And the scolding and beseeching  
Are just turned to infant-teaching.  
(SS: 3-4)

Very little of the beautifully detailed descriptions from the journal survive; the poem is given over almost entirely to an interpretation of the relation of each of the figures to the other. Chiefly, what has happened between the prose version and the poem is a paring away at excess detail. The prose functions on the level of pure translation, but as a work in its own right there is a level of subjective interpretation, a shaping personality, which is absent. The poem manages deftly to catch the essence of the tableau without descending into verbose description; the strong lyric style, with the light-hearted rhythm and full, chiming rhymes manages to catch something of the wistful Rococo essence of the painting. The reader may have seen it, or will be tempted to do so, but it is not ultimately necessary to an appreciation of the poem. What interests Michael Field is the imagined relationship between the protagonists, with Venus as mother figure, Hermes/Mercury as father, and Cupid as the intervening child. Michael Field turns a captivating Renaissance painting into a narrative picture depicting two fractious lovers, a man and woman, and the role that the child plays in healing domestic discord. It is the child in this scenario, and its need for education (which it is seen as requiring from both the male and female) that unites the two as a couple and eases their current dispute. This is an apparent acknowledgement on the behalf of Michael Field of the means through which heterosexual unions can be given

purpose and apparent longevity. This is no longer sensual pleasure for its own sake, or for the sake of either the man or the woman, but with a social and moral purpose to give it viability and credence. Otherwise, the man and woman, the creative forces of Venus and Mercury, would drift apart and become potentially destructive. This poem works as a piece of highly subjective ekphrasis, where even the name of Mercury is changed, in order to put forth a wholly personal interpretation of the work of art and the relation between the sexes.

The most audacious example of Michael Field's subjective 'translation' of a painting comes in the form of 'Benozzo Gozzoli's *Treading the Press*.' Based on a fresco of Gozzoli, Michael Field's painting describes the actions of a group of young grape treaders: 'Maidens with white, curving napes / And coiled hair backward leap, / As they catch the fruit, mid laughter, / Cut from every sylvan rafter' (SS: 20, 4-6). Michael Field goes on to describe the actions of the grape crushers, whose 'smashing' and 'thrashing' of the fruit results in the 'must' and 'oozings' of the juice, which carry sensuous, almost Keatsian overtones of fructified sexual release (SS: 20-1, 11-13). The poem succinctly concludes: 'Wine that kindles and entrances / Thus is made by one who dances' (SS: 21, 17-18). Overall, this poem may appear to be a relatively straightforward ekphrasis which is charged with all the energy and ecstasy of the young dancers' movements which the fresco can only imply. And yet, there is one element from the fresco which Michael Field has not mentioned. The figure of Noah, in the centre, denouncing the self-centred seeking after sensual pleasures of the wine-treaders, warning of their doom, is absent from the poem. Michael Field, looking at the original art-work, has averted the gaze from the intervening male presence at its heart, literally refusing to look at the religious moral, and preferring the pagan *jouissance* of the doomed, youthful dancers. They, too, ignore Noah, and dance for the moment, for its own sake, regardless of the herald of their imminent demise. Dancing, as the ultimate form of rebellion and projected indifference runs throughout the entire Michael Field oeuvre as well as this collection. It is an act of social and moral defiance, but so is ignoring Noah, as Ehnenn notes 'the absent Noah [...] becomes ironically supplanted by the sensuous description and Dionysian spirit of the women in this picture-poem' (Ehnenn: 2004: 221). There is also in this poem an implicit echo of the imagery from Olive Schreiner's allegory 'The Sunlight Lay Across My Bed' from *Dreams* (1890): 'Men [...] threw what was left in their glasses up to the roof, and let it fall back in cascades. Women dyed their children's garments

in the wine [...] as the dancers whirled, they overturned a vessel, and their garments were bespattered' (Schreiner 1890 [2003]: 37). However, as with Gozzolli's painting, Michael Field has no truck with any moral – or political – messages. By taking static representations of dancing and pagan revelry from Grand Master paintings, and giving them fresh agency and action through the animating force of poetry and allusion to other literary sources, Michael Field underlines the strength and necessity of the ekphrastic process – of excluding details as much as including them – as a powerful tool for aesthetic and moral rebellion.

### **'Delicious Womanhood': The Female as Object**

One of the most fascinating aspects of this collection is the way that Michael Field's highly subjective, radicalised gaze explores representations of women in Renaissance art. There are poems which deal with anonymous women, such as 'A Portrait', and 'Treading the Press' amongst others, but the majority cover archetypes of femininity and feminine sexuality, such as the Mona Lisa, Venus and the Madonna. Michael Field's poems dealing with paintings of these women fascinate for the ways in which they re-appropriate them from the male gaze – in a neat punning inversion, Heffernan's 'duel' of masculine gaze and female object becomes the *dual* female gaze – not simply for a 'lesbian' audience, but for all women, while at the same time appearing to do it for the sake of men as well.

In the poem on the Mona Lisa, 'La Gioconda', an interesting thing occurs in the opening lines. The speaker of the poem, the united gaze of Bradley and Cooper, standing in front of the painting becomes itself the object of attention. As Vadillo notes: 'Michael Field is both the observer and the observed, the onlooker and the object of the gaze' (Vadillo 2005: 192). Looking upon one of the most famous Renaissance images in the world, the speaker of the poem is caught in the returned stare of 'Historic, sidelong, implicating eyes' (SS: 8, 1). No mimetic description of the original is attempted; it is possibly assumed to be well known enough for Michael Field to draw upon a shared cultural knowledge. But what permeates the piece is the power and autonomy of the returned gaze of the painting, of the female object, immortalised for her beauty's sake, and retaining the ability to allure and transfix. (The viewer is held by the gaze of the art-work, just as in Housman's poem.) At one with the tranquil scene of lakes, rocks and fields behind her, her face reveals little of

the submerged potential for causing harm, and all of the powers of attraction: 'Landscape that shines suppressive of its zest / For those vicissitudes by which men die' (SS: 8, 10-11). Like the beautiful view behind her, she contains as much latent threat as she promises fulfilment. This Mona Lisa is certainly in the same vein as Pater's *femme-fatale* vision. What Michael Field creates is a powerful representation not of the contents of the painting, but of a particular impression which it awakes. The image of the female which is left is one of self-containment, authority and potential threat. This Mona Lisa, tight lipped, beguiling, retains all of her mysteries; she does not invite communication like '*L'Indifférent*'. She has all the means of turning the gaze outwards, and making the viewer/reader the uncomfortable focus of attention in the game of desire between viewing subject and static aesthetic object.

A very similar effect is created in the magnificently accomplished piece 'A Portrait, by Bartolommeo Veneto'. Veneto's painting is commonly entitled *Flora*, depicting the goddesses of Nature entwined with wild flowers, gazing out directly from the canvas, squarely meeting the gaze of the viewer. However, in Michael Field's poem, Flora has become an anonymous woman, a courtesan, who has requested that her portrait be executed while her beauty is at its prime so that it can retain its power to thrall men long after her own demise:

So was she painted and for centuries  
Has held the fading field-flowers in her hand  
Austerely as a sign. O fearful eyes  
And soft lips of the courtesan who planned  
To give her fragile shapeliness to art, whose reason spanned  
Her doom, who bade her beauty in its cold  
And vacant eminence persist for all men to behold.  
(SS: 29, 29-35)

The seven stanzas lend a feeling of solidity, tangibility: each one is like a separate panel, a canvas, akin to the use of the sonnet in D. G. Rossetti and Swinburne's ekphrastic works. Michael Field looks behind the figurative name of the title, beneath the thin enduring mask of paint which has achieved a level of immortality for the once living woman. What the poem represents is not so much the actual portrait simply translated, but an imaginative portrait of a woman bargaining for her own sexual authority through the complex system of the aesthetic. In order for her image to endure and retain its ability to attract the male gaze, it first has to be shaped and translated by the proxy of the male artist. Michael Field's poem then reaches behind

the gauze of the image to bring forth a subjective conception of the woman in an attempt to foreground her own possible intentions in being painted and rescue her from the control of the male gaze. Marion Thain has stated that both ‘the painting and the poem seek to extract [...] beauty and preserve it in the realm of art and artifice’ (Thain 2007c: 227). Although an exercise in artifice, Michael Field’s poem is equally about power, and the way that this power is wielded and controlled through art and artifice. After centuries, the female image still has the power to attract the viewer’s gaze; but she is no passive visual commodity. Indeed, behind the image of Veneto’s *Flora*, Michael Field suggests, was a real woman with her own motives – narcissistic, monetary and sexual – in being painted. It is this shadowy woman, long dead, the product of Michael Field’s imagination, which is given new life, not simply the beautiful image on the canvas. In this manner, as Julia Saville has noted, Michael Field opts to ‘refuse the figurative capacity of the title *Flora* and instead describe this female body as autonomous, free terrain’ (Saville 2005: 193). The trope of withholding, evident in ‘Watteau’s *L’Indifférent*’, and also, I would claim, in ‘*La Gioconda*’, is present here too: ‘her leftward smile endows / The gazer with no tidings from the face’ (SS: 27, 3-4). The silent image, as well as the beguiling, enigmatic woman, implores the vocal intervention of the viewer, whether it is the ostensibly masculine Michael Field, seeking to place living flesh back upon the spectral, desirable image, or Bradley and Cooper, the two women with one voice, lifting the forgotten woman from her silent oblivion, weaving a tale around her of sexual power, and a struggle to transcend the wastes of time: ‘The small, close mouth, leaving no room for breath, / In perfect, still pollution smiles – Lo, she has conquered death!’ (SS: 27, 48-9).

The depiction of the feminine in these poems tends towards a view which is by turns liberating *and* discomfiting. These are by no means objects which comfortably surrender themselves to the gaze, be it of the artist, the viewer, or the dualised translating gaze of Bradley and Cooper as Michael Field. The most fascinating representations of femininity and the presentation of the female body as aesthetic object come in the several poems which deal with the figure of Venus. Scattered throughout the volume, there are no fewer than five poems which contain her in their titles and many more besides where she features as a peripheral, but nonetheless thematically central, character. Indeed, I believe it is these poems on Venus which provide the narrative backbone of this seemingly random collection: the

growth of Venus – as both emblem of Love and as a woman – from innocence to hard-earned experience and ultimately joy and authority. Many of these poems are drawn from the paintings of Botticelli; the first of which is ‘Botticelli’s *Birth of Venus*’. The piece is ordered into four uniform ten line stanzas in iambic tetrameter. This sense of order is matched in the way that the eye of the speaker moves progressively from one aspect of the painting to another in succeeding stanzas, echoing perfectly the harmonious structure and organising of the protagonists in the original. The first stanza sets the scene, with the description of Venus emerging in the centre of the painting on her shell: ‘a girl who seeks to bind / New-born beauty with a tress / Gold about her nakedness’ (SS: 13, 8-10). The second stanza depicts Flora, goddess of Nature, ready to embrace the newly emerged goddess with a shawl, to dry her and claim her for the spring; the third stanza depicts Zephyrus and Boreas from the left-hand side of the painting, as they sweep towards the Venus, blowing her shell in to land. Placed between these two figures, on the one hand pure earthly femininity, on the other forceful, challenging masculinity, Venus is immediately at the centre of a battle for her bodily possession between divergent passionate forces. She inclines her hip towards Flora, but depends upon Boreas for movement. For Jill Ehnenn, the poem ‘depicts two different kinds of erotic desire – male and female’ (Ehnenn 2004: 224). Finding herself at the centre of a conflict of desiring allegiances, Michael Field depicts Venus as a somewhat bewildered, emotional young girl – ‘Tearful shadow in her eyes / Of reluctant sympathies’ (SS: 15, 2-3) – inexperienced, and not expecting such a conflict before she arrives on land:

Candour far too lone to speak  
 And no knowledge on her brows;  
 Virgin stranger, come to seek  
 Covert of strong orange-boughs  
 By the sea-wind scarcely moved, –  
 She is love that hath not loved.  
(SS: 15, 39-40)

This is Love, on the verge of reaching land, naked, compromised, and afraid. The tone of this last stanza carries an echo of the journal notes made after seeing the painting: ‘the soft guardian eyes of almost tearful shadow, the whole body timid, full of the instinct of flight.’<sup>31</sup> Here again is the idea that Venus must herself experience

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<sup>31</sup> Field, Michael, BL. Add. MS. 46778, 1890-1, fol. 65r

love in all of its complex vicissitudes in order to be its representative, a sentiment echoed from ‘Adônis and Aphrodîtê’ in *Bellerôphon*, who must grow ‘pale / With Love’s dread languishment’ (*B*: 131, 10-11) before she can have the authority – and the audacity – to make others do the same.

Venus will go on to gain sexual enlightenment in *Sight and Song* but at great emotional cost. Michael Field chooses to continue this narrative strain through Botticelli, with the next significant episode being ‘Botticelli’s *Venus and Mars*’. This poem forms an extensive description of the tableau painting by Botticelli; much of Michael Field’s efforts go into detailing the telling position of Venus and Mars as they lie apart, their heads at opposite ends of the canvas, supposedly after Venus has succumbed sexually to Mars. She is looking at her lover in vain, who is sound asleep, almost dead in the swoon of satiated passion, as a number of fauns fail to rouse him from a torpid slumber. In the final stanza, after an extensive description of the scene, Michael Field offers a subjective, scathing denouement:

O tragic forms, the man,  
The woman – he asleep,  
She lone and sadder than  
The dawn, too wise to weep  
Illusion that to her  
Is empire, to the earth  
Necessity and stir  
Of sweet, predestined mirth!  
Ironical she sees,  
Without regret, the work her kiss has done  
And lives a cold enchantress doomed to please  
Her victims one by one.  
(SS: 46, 73-84)

Interestingly, both figures are seen as tragic in their own separate experiences of heterosexual desire. This is a view which was present in the poems on Sappho and Phaon in *Long Ago* and which now finds fuller, harsher expression here in *Sight and Song*. It is the protagonists’ lack of emotional communion, their inability to satisfy each other despite indulging in the most intimate of acts that delivers the greatest irony. The most illuminating comment upon these sexual dynamics comes from the journal description of the painting: ‘fulfilment of love is so like the fulfilment of life: how tragic are the lives of great figures – he sleeping in illusion, she already above it,



and watchful lest it should cheat her ever again.’<sup>32</sup> Venus’s failing, her very doom, is that she *will* ‘please’ her male lovers though they will fail to do the same for her. Her only real blessing is her lack of regret, her sense of growing awareness to the emotional bankruptcy of heterosexual love. In Michael Field’s only published short story, ‘An Old Couple’ (1887), Adam and Eve are depicted in old age, alive and together in the late nineteenth century. They have endured much grief and hardship, but it is this which is seen as strengthening their relationship, and giving them a role to play to the other: ‘It is doubtful indeed whether they would ever have learnt to care much for each other in Paradise, where there was neither peril nor discomfort’ (Field 1887: 223). The problem with this Venus and Mars is that unlike in the Adam and Eve story, the two protagonists do not have anything to tie them together (like Venus and Mercury earlier in the collection who had Cupid); there is no third element or *shared* hardship here to help dispel the emotional friction which is generated when male and female come together in the mindset of Michael Field.

Michael Field depicts Venus in three more poems taken from a single Botticelli painting, *Primavera*. The first one which takes the title of this canvas is a very complex, confused rendering of the crowd of gods and goddesses presented in a woodland scene (SS: 22-6). The second two poems, two sonnets which deal simply with the Venus in this canvas are much more focused and effective pieces (SS: 85-6). It is as though Michael Field simply cannot leave Botticelli’s haunted and haunting Venuses alone, viewing and writing about them borders almost on fetish. This is perhaps because, in the words of Pater, Botticelli renders Venus tantalisingly and ‘never without some shadow of death in the grey flesh and wan flowers’ (Pater 1980: 47). Moreover, as Marion Thain notes, he encapsulates the essence of ‘the pagan and the Christian in one synchronic moment’ (Thain 2007b: 80). Botticelli is a suitable source for Michael Field when wishing to depict the innocence of Venus, her melancholy temperament, as well as her physical desirability and painful spiritual journey towards greater self-knowledge. However, in order to render the achievement of this knowledge, when Venus has finally come to terms with her role and her own sexuality, Michael Field turns to another artist (again, favoured and championed by Pater), Giorgione:

Here is Venus by our homes

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<sup>32</sup> Field, Michael, BL. Add. MS. 46779, 1891, fol. 57v – r

And resting on a verdant swell  
Of a soft country flanked with mountain domes:  
She has left her arched shell,  
Has left the barren wave that foams,  
Amid earth's fruitful tithes to dwell.  
(SS: 98, 1-6)

Venus has travelled from the shore and now rests alone, naked, in a glade. She is fully inland, replete with all the confidence that her odyssey from the sea – through her various hardships – has lent her. In 'Giorgione's *Sleeping Venus*', one of the longest poems in the collection, Michael Field builds up line by line a lexical picture to represent every brush-stroke and contour of the original. The landscape that she lies in corresponds directly, sympathetically and harmoniously to the shape of her body: 'And her body has the curves, / The same extensive smoothness seen / In yonder breadths of pasture, in the swerves / Of the grassy mountain green' (SS: 99, 15-18). As in the poem on the birth of Venus, this is another yet more potent affirmation of the sororal connection between nature, the female body and the expression of love and desire. Angela Leighton has stated that it 'shows the extent to which art for art's sake, with its implication of pleasure for pleasure's sake, had freed Michael Field from a female heritage of repressed or displaced eroticism' (Leighton 1992: 215). This is one of the most discussed poems from *Sight and Song* mainly because of the non-displacement of its eroticism. This attitude of 'pleasure for pleasure's sake' climaxes in stanza four: having followed the contours of the outline of her body, Michael Field's gaze follows her left arm, as: 'Her hand the thigh's tense surface leaves, / Falling inward. Not even sleep / Dare invalidate the deep, / Universal pleasure sex / Must unto itself annex' (SS: 101-2, 62-6). There is little room for misinterpretation here in what Jill Ehnenn has called 'the only positive contemporary description of female masturbation' (Ehnenn 2004: 228). The pleasure that Venus experiences, 'the good / Of delicious womanhood' (SS: 102, 69-70) is self-initiated, and cannot come from congress with men: 'Sufficient unto herself [...]' she apparently needs no other to constitute her selfhood' (Saville 2005: 197).

This poem is extraordinary not only for its content, but the way in which the combined female vision of Bradley and Cooper, as Michael Field, guides the eye of the reader around the ekphrastic re-imagining of Giorgione's work. Its close, almost obsessive attention to detail perhaps makes it too overlong to be fully effective, and the very quirky diction and rhymes sometimes strike the wrong note, but it is

nevertheless a triumphant work. Its true worth lies in the complex readings which it opens regarding the depiction of the female form and sexual autonomy. On one level, this can be seen as a male writer, taking an image of a naked woman, and salaciously reproducing it for the sake of the male gaze. And yet, behind this are two women, presenting this image not only potentially for a 'lesbian' audience, but rescuing the female form for the enjoyment of the heterosexual female gaze. By the end of the collection in 'Watteau's *L'Emarquement Pour Cythère*', Venus has become an almost omniscient force: 'Methinks none sees / The statue of a Venus [...] her marble mien, / Secret, imperial, blank' (SS: 119, 45-6 & 48-9). Now when she is present, it is as a peripheral figure, particularly in poems on Watteau's paintings, where she appears in the sidelines as a statue, throwing a somewhat menacing shade onto the proceedings. Through joy and suffering in the flesh she has made the final journey from literal woman to figurative, omnipotent force of Nature.

### **'With Body Fresh For Use': The Boy as Erotic Object**

With such arresting depictions of female sensuality it is sometimes easy to forget that an almost equal amount of attention is paid in *Sight and Song* to the visually appealing, enigmatic, and sexually liberating body of the young male. If masculine sexuality and desire are depicted as potentially negative forces, it should be noted that this only relates to the more aggressive, least pliant aspects of masculinity which seek to dominate, threaten or ignore the feminine. The depiction of the adolescent male on the other hand – suffering, persecuted – is quite tender and sympathetic in comparison. The inclusion of these poems, which deal with such figures as Christ and St. Sebastian, combining the pagan and the Christian to surprising effect, can be seen as both contradicting and at the same time reinforcing a lesbian reading of the text.

In 'Giorgione's *Shepherd Boy*', Michael Field creates a poem from the experience of viewing the painting in Hampton Court which expresses a deep sympathy with and for the aesthetic quality of young men, their physical beauty, their potential as an emblem for love and desire, complementary to that of the feminine. There is no socio-political aspect to this depiction of male beauty, only an expression from the speaker of a pleasure in gazing for its own sake, drawing parallels with the softness and innocence of the vanished, golden classical age:

His flesh a golden haze, the line  
 Of cheek and chin is only made  
 By modulation, perfect, fine,  
 Of their rich colour into shade.  
 His curls have sometime veiled the top  
 Of the wide forehead, – we can see  
 How where the sunbeams might not stop  
 A subtle whiteness stretches, free  
 From the swarthy burning of their love:  
 The opened shirt exposes  
 Fair skin that meets the stain above  
 Half-coyly with its white and roses.  
 (SS: 66, 13-24)

The eyes of the speaker move over the body of the painted youth, seeking to almost probe and penetrate the surface of the paint in the way that the sunbeams are depicted as attempting to reach his shaded skin through the gauze of his shirt. He is a body gently burned by desire, but is largely untainted, pure, and as yet undefiled by physical lust. Unlike the courtesan in 'A Portrait', his smile or features exhibit no 'pollution'. Michael Field's translation of the young shepherd into verse is idealistic, somewhat coy and is full of a freshness which many contemporary depictions of young men, particularly from more Decadent writers such as Alfred Douglas and Theodore Wratislaw lack. Indeed, in the case of Wratislaw, his poem 'A Sicilian Boy', from *Caprices* (1893), caused a scandal with the implied homoerotic desires of the speaker for the young man: 'Love, I adore the contours of thy shape, / Thine exquisite breasts and arms adorable; / The wonders of thy heavenly throat compel / Such fire of love as even my dreams escape' (Wratislaw 1893: 31, 1-4). Unlike Michael Field's poem, the desires here are more tactile: 'Between thine arms I find mine only bliss' (Wratislaw 1893: 31, 11). What saved Michael Field's poem from the censure which Wratislaw's aroused – resulting in the poem being 'suppressed' and withheld from future publication (White 1999: 353) – is that the male body is seen as a liberating space for the gaze, the female as much as the male. It may have been in the back of the audience's mind that the 'male' author was in fact two women. The complex erotic implications of the poem are implicit as opposed to explicit. Martha Vicinus has noted: 'For men, the boy represented freedom without committing them to action; for women, he represented their frustrated desire for action' (Vicinus 1999: 83). Therefore, for lesbian writers, and also for Michael Field

in particular it would seem, the figure of the youthful boy does represent a complementary parallel to the plight (as well as pleasures) of femininity, embodying a world of potential emotional and physical freedom that women in the late nineteenth century were routinely denied.

This frustrated desire for action of the adolescent boy finds no better expression than in the poems which deal with representations of the body of St. Sebastian. There are three main instances where Michael Field deals with a visual representation of the young martyr, the most accomplished and heartfelt being ‘Antonello da Messina’s *Saint Sebastian*’. This is a far less positive work in tone than that on Watteau’s male herald of pleasure, or Giorgione’s shepherd boy. Michael Field depicts, through the restricted and violated body of the young man at the painting’s centre a form of desire denied any mode of fulfilment by wider society. It is a visually accomplished poem which suitably complements the arresting visuals of da Messina’s work. The poem opens with the central image of the painting: Sebastian tied to a stake in the centre of a courtyard, pierced with arrows. But before going into any great descriptive or interpretive detail Michael Field moves on to describe, for six whole stanzas, the fascinating, intricate details in the background which show everyday life continuing, indifferent to the supreme suffering of the young man in their midst:

Arch and chimney rise aloft into the air:  
On the balconies are hung forth carpets rare  
Of an Eastern, vivid red;  
Idle women lean  
Where the rags are spread,  
Each with an indifferent mien.  
(SS: 70, 19-24)

It is this indifference to suffering which particularly struck Cooper on first viewing the painting: ‘four idle women sit in twos on the balcony, leaning over Eastern carpets. In the courtyard a man is in gross sleep – a woman + child slip in between the sand-coloured light of the arches. Two men talk, figures move over the distance.’<sup>33</sup> A similar point of the world’s indifference to suffering later appeared in W. H. Auden’s ekphrastic ‘Musée des Beaux Arts’, where, speaking of Brueghel’s *Icarus* the speaker blithely notes: ‘for instance: how everything turns away / Quite

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<sup>33</sup> Field, Michael, BL. Add. MS. 46779, 1891, fol. 69v

leisurely from the disaster; the ploughman may / Have heard the splash, the forsaken cry, / But for him it was not an important failure' (Auden 1994: 179, 14-17). There is little blitheness in Cooper's reading of Messina's townsfolk, only ignorance and perhaps a certain calculated coldness. Michael Field's eye for detail in these opening stanzas is microscopic, but it is these small quotidian details which heighten the plight of the young martyr: while his young life ebbs away in extreme pain, the world of domestic routine carries on without care. It is this world of husbands and wives, children and social conformity which he is placed outside of, and at whose hands he is arguably put to death.

Following such a dutiful re-creation of the optical surroundings of Sebastian and his body, Michael Field then offers in stanza fourteen a subjective interpretation of the young man's predicament:

He, with body fresh for use, for pleasure fit,  
 With its energies and needs together knit  
     In an agreeable exigence,  
     Must endure the strife,  
         Final and intense  
     Of necessity with life.  
(SS: 74, 79-84)

Sebastian, at the height of youth, punctured by arrows, becomes in the hands of Michael Field a reproach against the God that he silently assails with pleas and questions. Fate and society have decided to put him to death and thus deprive him of what Michael Field sees him as being born for: the fulfilment of his own subjective desires. In her own separate reaction to the poem, written in the journal after Cooper, Bradley commented that 'he was not made to be a hero, but an Italian shepherd-boy. It is pain coming on a pagan nature.'<sup>34</sup> In other words, the martyrdom of the young man is a violation: he was not created by Nature to end as a religious parable, a symbol, but to fulfil his innate desires, un-dictated by society, to live his true, free 'pagan nature'. Michael Field's Sebastians represent masculinity on erotic show, but wounded, denied even the modes of self-fulfilment which women may secretly enjoy and almost take for granted. For Dinah Ward the 'Antonello Sebastian is a positively masculine and active figure' (Ward 2007: 167). However, I would contend that it is a

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<sup>34</sup> Field, Michael, BL. Add. MS. 46779, 1891, *fol.* 69v

masculinity emphatically feminised through youth and vulnerability which makes the image most attractive to the eye of Michael Field.

Sebastian has a long tradition as a popular motif within the works of male homosexual writers and artists – particularly in the nineties – requiring a sympathetic symbol for their own sense of persecution. For him to be used by two female writers, probably homosexual themselves, is not so idiosyncratic as it may seem. Within the suffering of Sebastian Michael Field finds something which corresponds, indeed, possibly surpasses, the frustration and disappointment that the Venuses feel at the hands of unsympathetic, hyper-masculine men. By using a boy, Michael Field can place a covert discourse of homosexual desire (detectable in ‘*Sleeping Venus*’) within a wider context of aesthetic sexual representation. The frustration felt by Sebastian is not exclusive to male homosexuals, or women who love women, but heterosexual women as well, and anyone else who has suffered thwarted desires.

The sufferings of Sebastian also find a mirror in the poems which deal with depictions of Christ’s Crucifixion. Indeed, ‘Giovanni Bellini’s *Blood of the Redeemer*’ is almost a companion piece to the Messina Sebastian poem. Christ is depicted as wounded on the cross, agonised and unaware of any spectator’s gaze, yet still full of the youthful energy which made Sebastian’s death seem to him so wasteful:

For Thou art bleeding, bleeding; we can trace  
Naught but a dizzy sickness in Thy face;  
Thine eyes behold us not, yet round the place  
    Whence flows Thy blood Thy conscious palm  
With fervour of unbated will doth cling,  
    Forcing its spring.  
(SS: 95, 31-6)

The pose, the circumstance, the very structure of the painting and the poem are reminiscent of the Sebastian poem. This is a representation of a true martyrdom, but is still nevertheless an instance of a young, misunderstood man being physically punished for non-conformity, for troubling the status quo. As he suffers on the cross the background is again replete with indifferent characters continuing their lives: ‘Blithe pagan youths sculptured behind Thee go / Processional to sacrifice’ (SS: 95, 43-4). In the mind of Michael Field the pagan and the sacred stand side by side – in true Renaissance fashion – sometimes overlapping and mingling with almost little aesthetic or thematic conflict; the plights of Sebastian and Christ are indeed seen as

being one and the same. Both young men are physically punished for their differences, their open antagonism to the common order.

The ways in which the male form is depicted in *Sight and Song* are fascinating; this forms a secondary strand of narrative which runs parallel to that of the growth of Venus. As she moves from vulnerability to a state of power, the male form goes in the opposite direction. The masculine figure of Mars is doomed in his own way to experience less pleasure from women than if he were able to connect on an emotional level – Sebastian and Christ, more vulnerable, mortal, feminised, must suffer at the hands of a patriarchal orthodoxy to which they do not fully conform. Even the fact that Christ's suffering will lead to eternal life is at this moment no real comfort: 'For us, no joy it is that Thou dost rise' (*SS*: 97, 68). It is only the shepherd-boy who manages some degree of freedom and fulfilment in his unfettered, pagan, pastoral state. Masculinity is seen as being in crisis in this collection – at once ignorant and vulnerable, the violator and the ultimate target of violation.

When *Sight and Song* appeared in a relatively extensive print-run of four hundred copies, the reaction of the critics was somewhat mixed. One of the most barbed, even disappointed notes was sounded by W. B. Yeats, an early advocate of Michael Field's plays, but now a somewhat bemused reader of the poetry:

This interesting, suggestive and thoroughly unsatisfactory book is a new instance of the growing tendency to make the critical faculty do the work of the creative. [...] That is to say, the two ladies who hide themselves behind the pen-name of Michael Field have set to work to observe and interpret a number of pictures, instead of singing out of their own hearts and setting to music their own souls. They have poetic feeling and imagination in abundance, and yet they have preferred to work with the studious and interpretive side of the mind and write a guide-book to the picture galleries of Europe, instead of giving us a book full of the emotions and fancies which must be crowding in upon their minds perpetually.

(Yeats 1970: 225-6)

What annoys Yeats is the air of calculated study which the 'Preface' and many of the poems exhibit, and the resulting atmosphere of repressed emotion. It is almost certain that he would have preferred the much more Paterian passing panorama of 'A Crown of Praise', had the poem been published as an ekphrastic work. Also inherent in this



critique is the accusation of hiding – it is not enough that the two women hide behind the guise of a man, they must also do their best to hide their own keenest instincts and reactions to the aesthetic moment in order to produce something which is at best a quirky experiment, a conceptual failure, a guide book.

By contrast John Miller Gray, Michael Field's closest supporter at the time, was ever ready to praise. He manages to look beyond the poems as translations of visual objects, and claims, quite rightly, that their true worth lies in what they depict, not simply how they do so: 'And yet, surely poets may be permitted to study scenes of human life and visions of the things of nature as these things are mirrored in lines and colours upon the canvas of the painter, and to derive from his reflection of them such suggestion as the actualities themselves might afford' (Gray 1892: 583). And yet he also criticises where he thinks fit, seeing the work as a whole as not being up to the high standard of everything – poetry and plays – that has gone before; put simply, 'it may be regarded as a pleasant interlude to this artist's more strenuous work' (Gray 1892: 583). I believe that the true significance and worth of Michael Field's *Sight and Song* lies somewhere between this praise of Gray and the censure of Yeats. The poems can at times seem formally dry and static, but what they lack in technical or pictorial accomplishment, they more than make up for in their thematic explorations of sexuality, gender and the politics of the aesthetic gaze.

In terms of a thematic progression from *Long Ago* where sexual and romantic relations between men and women were fraught, *Sight and Song* takes this even further to the point where the masculine and the feminine are seen as polar opposites with conflicting interests which get in the way of either satisfying the other. The feminine can only find fulfilment within the self. It is masculinity which is in the real state of crisis. Although the theme of motherhood, so central to the collections which have come before, is present, it is often in the form of suffering, as embodied by the grieving Madonna in 'A Pietà, by Carlo Crivelli': 'A mother bent on the body of her Son, / Fierce tears and wrinkles around her eyes' (SS: 106, 1-2).

Perhaps the most enduring image from the collection is that of the sublime, peaceful Sleeping Venus. But there are, it must be said, a startling amount of savage, violent, even brutal images of grief, physical wounding and maiming of the female and male body. Beneath the surface of rescuing the female image from the bounds of the male gaze and critiquing masculinity, there is something much darker, something that hints at a deeper tension in the motives and influences behind this collection.

Likewise, the young male body has all the potential of self-liberation – for the woman as well as the man – but it is denied this freedom, even broken, by a prevailing patriarchy: the liberation of the male body from masculinity is a concept almost too destabilising to be contemplated.

Another interesting element is the co-existence of Christian and pagan iconography. Although there was a good deal of interrogation regarding Christianity in early volumes, there is a now subtle deepening of feeling; there is no overt questioning of doctrine but an acceptance of the suffering of Christ as both liberation and fulfilment of life. This is basically what separates the depiction of Christ and Sebastian; otherwise they could be almost interchangeable tropes. For Jill Ehnenn he is literally a ‘hybrid figure linking Greek beauty and sensuality to Christian notions of sacrifice’ (Ehnenn 2004: 235). In true Paterian style, Michael Field’s poetic collection exhibits a blending of seemingly contradictory belief systems which are more complementary, or so it appears, than they are conflicting.<sup>35</sup> The appearance of Christ, along with the Madonna, marks the point from which they begin to be serious recurring icons in the dramatic cycle of Michael Field’s poetic oeuvre.

As a work of ekphrasis *Sight and Song* ultimately succeeds through the discourse which it opens and invites regarding objectivity/subjectivity, and between what Hollander called the ‘notional’ ekphrasis, and what Heffernan saw as the inescapable politics of the gaze. Although Michael Field intended the works to be objective translations, what results is tinted at all times with the views and personality of the authors. In the longer pieces, Michael Field creates a model where the picture is described first and then a subjective opinion is offered. But all points, in deciding what is described first, where the ‘eye’ of the reader is to be pointed, are dictated by subjective aesthetic objectives. What results is an aesthetic vastly different from ‘A Crown of Praise’ but one which is never less than intriguing in the way that it impels the reader to visualise what is being expressed, to engage with the personality of the shadowy author in a work of collaboration: the poetic re-imagining of the visual.

As for the gendered instabilities offered by ekphrasis, these are multiplied by Michael Field’s plurality of eyes and duality of gender. Both Yeats and Gray emphasise the gender of Bradley and Cooper, but neither looks at what happens when the work is seen as that of Michael Field. The poems about the naked female body

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<sup>35</sup> ‘Just such a strange flower was that mythology of the Italian Renaissance, which grew up from the mixture of two traditions, two sentiments, the sacred and the profane’ (Pater 1980: xxi).

can in one sense be seen as the homosexual musings of two women, or the feminist reclaiming of the female image as an object of beauty for the female gaze; alternately, the poems could be seen as the heterosexual desires of a male gazer, salaciously recreating them in a verbal medium for male readers. However, by a different token, the poems by two women about a young man can be seen as legitimising the female heterosexual gaze, or the homosexual expressions of a single man. All forms of possible interpretation paradoxically co-exist. It is hard to think that this would have been potentially lost on Bradley and Cooper; the results should perhaps really be seen as an elaborate, shifting game played with the audience.

And yet, after all, if it is Berenson's beauty which informs the poems on Christ, Sebastian and the shepherd-boy, then the feelings of frustration which it awakens – of conflicting allegiances between one love and another – are what feed into their sense of alienation and unavoidable personal suffering. Even long after the infatuation with Berenson, the relation between Bradley and Cooper would never be the same again. It would have to redefine itself in order to survive. One of the chief successes of *Long Ago* and *Sight and Song* is the unity of their poetic voice, but afterwards, due to the negative effects of the Berenson association, the unified voice was off-balanced and would never properly realign. As will be seen in the next chapter, this had both a negative and positive impact as the Michael Field lyric voice developed ever greater complexity and thematic poignancy.

## **Chapter 4. ‘Issues of Heart and Mind’: Courtly Postures and Song in *Underneath the Bough* (1893, 1893 & 1898)**

Less than a year after the publication of *Sight and Song* came a collection which had had an even longer gestation period: *Underneath the Bough*. This third book of lyric verse to be published under the name of Michael Field marked something of a change in direction from its two immediate predecessors, *Long Ago* and *Sight and Song*. Instead of being a translation of either a textual or visual source, it is a seemingly loose collection of lyrics, divided into four separate books. Rather than the more consistent tones of voice in the Sapphic and ekphrastic sequences, these poems exhibit a wider range of voices and tonal registers. The degree of formal experimentation and accomplishment is like nothing Bradley and Cooper had achieved in verse before. Both had high hopes for their latest work. When it eventually appeared in May of 1893, Bradley triumphantly remarked in her journal upon receiving the proofs in March: ‘How glad to have come to maturity, to touch real life, to think real thoughts, to be becoming a person, living consciously “that age is best which is the first when growth + blood are warmer” – no – not so – that age is best when one thinks clearest [...] something of the courage of the modern is coming into us.’<sup>36</sup> And yet, barely beneath the surface ebullience over a new artistic birth lay a mass of personal tensions, doubts and anxieties which would have serious long-term implications. Upon publication, the collection was slow in gaining recognition. In barely five months – by September of the same year – a hastily ‘revised and reduced’ edition emerged. Five years after this, an American edition appeared, published by Thomas B. Mosher in Maine, containing many new poems and recasting the entire structure yet again. In the interim between 1893 and 1908, no new original collection of lyric poetry was published. It is strange that having once published *Underneath the Bough* – which, in many ways, marks the maturity of Michael Field’s poetic voice – Bradley and Cooper should suddenly become so uncomfortable with this particular volume that they would rework it twice over five years. A book which takes their meditations on human sexuality and desire to a whole new expressive and aesthetic level clearly contained personal and artistic elements which they just could not leave alone. It was certainly, as Joseph Bristow has claimed, ‘the volume which would tax

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<sup>36</sup> Field, Michael, BL. Add. MS. 46781, 1893, fol. 17r – 18v

their creative energies the most' (Bristow 2007: 50). Bradley and Cooper continued writing lyric poetry through the remaining years of the nineties as the manuscripts illustrate, and they always had the intention of publishing another collection. But the dynamics of their collaboration had started to change. They wrote increasingly separately, in so far as it is possible to discern this. All subsequent poetry by the two was always published as Michael Field's, but there would never again be a collection like *Long Ago* and *Sight and Song* which exhibited such a close unity of voice and style. *Underneath the Bough* not only marks the historical turning point when the Michael Field voice can be said to 'break', it vividly dramatises it.

The poems in the collection were produced over a number of years. Looking at Ivor Treby's catalogue it is possible to discern that many of the poems date from the early to mid eighties, before work on the Sapphic and ekphrastic volumes began. As Joseph Bristow has recently shown in an article on this volume, it is clear that by the end of the eighties, Bradley and Cooper were working upon the design of a collection which would echo the model of an Elizabethan book of songs. The 1880s had seen a critical and popular resurgence of interest in the Elizabethan song writers, such as Thomas Campion, William Byrd and John Dowland. A key figure in reviving these voices was A. H. Bullen, whose anthology *Lyrics from the Song-Books of the Elizabethan Age* (1889), was a direct influence upon Bradley and Cooper. The division of *Underneath the Bough* into four books replicated the practice of the Elizabethan lyricists, as did the adoption (or adaptation) of many of their stock courtly poses and tropes. Therefore, not only was Michael Field's latest collection again inspired by a book of popular scholarship (as were *Long Ago* and *Sight and Song*), but it was also composed and structured in a narrative and thematic way to assimilate the poetic practice common for lyric poets at the height of the Elizabethan Renaissance. It is something of an irony that given all this attention to period detail the choice of title evokes not so much courtly verse, but something altogether more exotic, something more redolent of the contemporary *zeitgeist*, even somewhat decadent in poise.<sup>37</sup> And yet it is this and other fundamental contradictions which make the volume, with its archaic basis, so essentially modern in overall effect. For all its courtly codes and practices, this is also a poetry completely drenched in a pagan

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<sup>37</sup> The title is taken from stanza 12 of Edward Fitzgerald's immensely popular translation of the *Rubáyát of Omar Khayyám* (1859): 'A Book of Verses underneath the Bough / A Jug of Wine, A Loaf of Bread – and Thou / Beside me singing in the wilderness – / Oh, Wilderness were Paradise enow!' (Fitzgerald 1999: 148, 45-8). This work deeply influenced Pre-Raphaelite and Decadent aesthetics.

openness and passionate lawlessness; for a book containing so many seemingly personal feelings, it takes as its model one which relies upon the assumption of multiple, anonymous personae.

The faithful John Miller Gray, ever the public and private champion of Michael Field, was to be instrumental in many aspects of the volume's development and reception. The correspondence between him and Bradley illustrates that even their relationship could be tested to the limits by Bradley's short temper, but it also shows the extent to which he was trusted to comment on the composition of many poems. On 'Great violets in a weedy tangle' he would forthrightly state: 'You ask me to write frankly [...] it does not at all stand the reputation you give it',<sup>38</sup> but his personal view was always tempered with praise and practical advice. His is a benign, officious, ghostly influence hovering behind *Underneath the Bough*. There are other male ghosts hovering in the wings, but not all of them so accommodating or encouraging. As mentioned at the close of the previous chapter, the influence of Bernard Berenson at this time in the early nineties was pervasive. Not only had he managed to upset the romantic balance between Bradley and Cooper, many of his letters during this time contain comments upon their work which make great show of his displeasure in the archaisms which permeate the Michael Field canon. On 22 December 1892 he would write:

The reasons for not writing Elizabethan verse nowadays are manifold. To begin with, Christ who had a fine palate in wine tells us not to put new wine into old bottles. I need scarcely tell you, that you directly were foreseen in that command, the new wine being the new spirit, and the old bottles being the Elizabethan rhymes, vocabulary and turns of phrase.

*Axiom:* Wherever there is a new spirit, there will appear a new form. It follows therefore that people who nowadays write Elizabethan verse may be accused of two crimes.

1) That they write pretty Elizabethan verse. This entails their utter futility. The Elizabethans have left us plenty of verses which are pretty and genuine. What do we want of pretty and sham verses?

2) That they write bad Elizabethan verse. This may mean that they would write any form of verse badly, or that they really have a new wine, and that this cracks the old bottle. In the first case they are nobodies, in the second fools.

Of course all this refers to people who think they have a calling for verse. If they choose to write Elizabethan verse for a pastime, it is nobody's business.

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<sup>38</sup> John M. Gray to Katharine Bradley, 13 June 1893. BL. Add. MS. 46853, *fols.* 108r – 109v

Berenson makes much here about the need of a new ‘form’, and yet *Underneath the Bough* is replete with them. But clearly Michael Field’s experimentation is too subtle, too nuanced for his tastes. This letter is designed to test them, to bend them to *his* conception of modernity. In this way, the letter is reminiscent of the negative criticism the young Bradley received from John Ruskin. (There is certainly something within the make-up of the Michael Field collaboration and its resultant productions which continually aggravated the male intelligentsia). This plea for ‘modernity’ could be seen as one of the reasons why the second edition abandoned the Elizabethan song-book structure. Bradley and Cooper would spend the summer with Berenson in 1892 and even 1893; the steady, dramatised fracturing of contradictory personae, the struggles between hetero/homosexual, male/female desires in *Underneath the Bough* can be seen as having a subjective rooting in Cooper’s split romantic allegiances and Bradley’s resulting feelings of jealousy and grief. When looking through the proofs of the poems, Cooper would state on 9 March 1893: ‘They are all bad art. Bernie would shout out his lips at them.’<sup>39</sup> There is a covert sense of relish here, but also evidence that she was now viewing her work through the negative lenses of Berenson’s aggressive criticism.

Many of the poems which appear in *Underneath the Bough* have received much critical attention, even becoming standards of the Michael Field oeuvre. However, there is relatively little on how the work functions as a whole.<sup>40</sup> In this chapter I will consider the way that the first edition of May 1893 works as a form within itself, as another conceptual literary experiment, exhibiting a wide variety of voices and forms. I aim to assess the ways in which desire, both for the male and the female love objects, expressed through an ambiguous mix of gendered speakers and covert sequences, takes on a new metaphorical and dramatic intensity which is unique not only within the Michael Field canon, but women’s poetry as a whole at this time. Though Bradley and Cooper may have been anxious about the archaic nature of these works, their instinct that they were producing poetry which was ‘modern’ both in theme and in aesthetic accomplishment becomes starkly evident.

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<sup>39</sup> Field, Michael, BL. Add. MS. 46781, 1893, fol. 30r

<sup>40</sup> However, recent articles and chapters by Robert P. Fletcher (1999), Joseph Bristow (2007), and Marion Thain (2007) have gone some way to opening up discussion of the collection as a whole.

### **Underneath the Bough as ‘Song-Book’**

Emily Harrington, commenting on the four-book structure of *Underneath the Bough*, has noted that ‘to distinguish one book from another requires careful study [...] they have no obvious organizing principles’ (Harrington 2008: 229). Conversely, I believe that each of the four books of lyrics in *Underneath the Bough* has an over-riding narrative, or a principal theme which unites the lyrics, however loosely, which are grouped there. The First and Second Books deal with love and death respectively, but with a very decided intertwining of interests in their various different voices and forms. The Third Book contains poems which apparently form a sequence of love poems from an elder speaker to a younger woman, while the Fourth Book contains elements of the previous three, but has two main narrative strands which show a parallel passion for a male and a female object of desire.

The Elizabethan song writers, Thomas Campion, John Dowland and William Byrd had collected and published their songs in a similar manner. Campion’s principal lyric poetry emerged in four books of ‘Ayres’, Dowland likewise produced four separate collections, or books. However, these books were chiefly anthologies of what they had written at the time, or what was currently popular: the individual books of songs, when placed together in a collected edition, lack the individual thematic and narrative drive which runs through each of the four books in Michael Field’s first edition of ‘songs’. When looking at *Underneath the Bough* it is interesting to see the poems in the light of the Elizabethan song-book tradition. For instance, it would be uncommon to think of a poem written by Campion from the obvious perspective of woman as anything other than a crafted persona, and yet this is a licence seldom extended to Michael Field. What could so often be seen as independent personae are most often read as autobiographical pieces; as Edward Thomas claimed: ‘the best lyrics seem to be the poet’s natural speech’ (Thomas 1981: 63). This is a complex issue, due to the fact that we know so much more about Bradley and Cooper’s thoughts and personal lives than writers from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but also because *Underneath the Bough* is a very deft and complex mix of personae, both objective and highly subjective: it is a text which weaves the fictional and the intimately personal into a rich tapestry of voices, images and allusions which are at once Elizabethan and ‘modern’, objective and subjective, but, overall, timeless in



their expression(s) of desire. This is clearly a work which is rooted in the Elizabethan song-book tradition, but which also contains many other echoes, such as Shakespeare and even, as Marion Thain has suggested, Tennyson (Thain 2007b: 110-13).

However, when wishing to assess the overriding impact of the Elizabethan lyricists on Michael Field's poems, the proof lies within their actual poetics:

There is a garden in her face  
Where roses and white lilies grow;  
A heavenly paradise is that place  
Wherein all pleasant fruits do flow  
          There cherries grow which none may buy,  
          Till 'Cherry ripe' themselves do cry.

Those cherries fairly do enclose  
Of orient pearl a double row,  
Which when her lovely laughter shows,  
They look like rose-buds filled with snow;  
          Yet them nor peer nor prince can buy,  
          Till 'Cherry ripe' themselves do cry.

(Bullen 1889: 80, 1-12)

This poem is just one of Campion's with which Bradley and Cooper would have been familiar. There are many echoes of them in *Underneath the Bough*, but this one in particular contains many of the themes and motifs which recur constantly throughout the collection. Opening with the metaphor of the young woman's face as a garden, Campion's poem blossoms into a series of images, of extended metaphors and similes through which the face is evoked by the fruitful gaze and budding passions of the speaker. The cherry-like lips – with their exotic pearl teeth, alternately filling the mouth like so much virgin snow – are temptingly ripe, inviting, but with the vocal ability to allay desire until they deem themselves to be ripe. It is a gently, teasingly erotic lyric where desire is aroused, but also deferred at the discretion of the lady. The garden-bred images emphasise youth, naturalness and sexuality, but at the same time carry a sense of the everyday, the familiar and the decorous. This is a desire expressed in the courtly tradition, carried out within the limits of a proscribed social code where the man is endlessly admiring, and the woman perpetually deferring. Courtly love, and courtly love poetry were there to 'teach you how to behave' (Stevens 1979: 208), to provide a decorous template for desire which was there to be broken as much as followed. John Stevens, in his masterly *Music and Poetry in the Early Tudor Court* (1979), defines the courtly lyric as 'perhaps, in essence, an

enigma – a riddling, or dark, way of conveying your thoughts to someone who is, or pretends to be, your lover [...] the love-lyric was a confidence which they [the audience] were intended to overhear, a loud whisper’ (Stevens 1979: 216). This elegant, orderly form of expressing romantic desire, with its shadowy erotic undertones and arch theatricality is something which Michael Field employs and transgresses with great flair and originality in *Underneath the Bough*. Not only does Michael Field make amusing play with the stock poses of courtly love, but, as will be seen, the imagery from nature – more particularly that taken from the typical English garden – a veritable language of roses, cherries, snow, sun, rain, and seasonal flux, becomes a new language for expressing passions at once so intimate, encoded and potentially transgressive.

### **The First and Second Books**

At the opening of the first edition of May 1893 there is a short and arresting poem (in the place of a prose preface) which acts as a scene-setter, an ‘Invocation’, as the title implies, of the muse: ‘*Thee, Apollo, in a ring / We encompass, carolling / Of the flowers, fruits and creatures / That thy features / Do express*’ (UTBa: v, 1-5, italics in original). This, it is implied, is to be a poetry drawn from nature, honouring its energies, praising its beauties, oddities and essential mystery as well as the equally (if not more) fascinating territory of the heart. Right at the outset, the spiritual deities, as well as the manner of address and world view are exclusively pagan. This is somewhat of a break with *Sight and Song* where the pagan and the Christian were as complementary as they were contradictory. The discourse of the relation between the pagan and the Christian, both as a mode of forming imagery as well as spiritual belief, will return to the forefront of Michael Field’s poetic agenda in future collections. But here, for the minute, the aesthetic, spiritual and sexual world of Michael Field is much more deeply interfused with the pagan. This is an invigorating aesthetics of desire not hemmed in by the walls of the drawing-room, the gallery or the cloister, but allowed to bud and flower out in the ‘open air of nature’ (WD: 6). At the close of ‘Invocation’, the speaker quite freely remarks to Apollo: ‘*We thy nymphs [...] in a ring / Dance around thee, carolling*’ (UTBa: 1893: v, 21-2, italics in original). Interestingly, although the reader hears but one voice, it is a plural voice, or at the very least the speaker is not alone. This is a new moment in the Michael Field

canon and one which recurs with greater complexity from here on in: the duality behind the unified mask of 'Michael Field' enters the fabric of the verse. The act of desiring the love-object is often turned inwards, that of voicing and writing that desire is externalised, a subject within itself.

The first book opens with what amounts to a second prefatory piece, and it will indeed appear as such in the second and third editions, 'Mortal, if thou art beloved':

Mortal, if thou art beloved,  
Life's offences are removed:  
All the fateful things that checkt thee,  
Hearten, hallow, and protect thee.  
Grow'st thou mellow? What is age?  
Tinct on life's illumined page,  
Where the purple letters glow  
Deeper, painted long ago.

(*UTBa*: 5, 1-8)

Against all of the ravages of mortality, sickness, age, sorrow, death, being loved is the universal panacea which alone not only cancels out the adverse nature of human experience, but turns it around: 'What is sorrow? Comfort's prime, / Love's choice Indian summer-clime. / Sickness? Thou wilt pray it worse / For so blessed, balmy nurse' (*UTBa*: 5, 9-12). The process of ageing, the yellowing of life's illuminated manuscript, only serves to throw the graven, purple letters of desire into deeper relief. This is an interesting image: with the life as text, the process of desiring and being desired is a form of textual collaboration, which will surface intermittently throughout the collection, but not always with the same sense of optimism. In this instance, all of life's negatives are made bearable, even pleasurable, through the transformative power of love: 'If thou art beloved, oh then / Fear no grief of mortal men!' (*UTBa*: 5, 21-2). Yet in order for love to be at its most intense, it almost needs to be tested to breaking point by adversity. The overall message here is one of triumph, of the all-mastering power of love, but as the poem makes clear, as well as the earlier collections, this only happens when the speaker is the 'beloved'; the spurned lover has no such emotional surety against the ills of experience or the turbulent vicissitudes of the heart. Overall, the poem acts as a rousing, optimistic jingle which announces the central concern of the collection: the importance of gaining and reciprocating desire against the invasive external forces of life and

society. What follows though, is often a far more penetrating, more complex and personal dissection of desire.

Immediately after this poem are a number of short lyrics which express an intense classical paganism. The first, 'Once, his feet among the roses', originally appeared in the poems at the close of *Bellerophôn*. (Eleven out of the twenty-eight poems of the first book are taken from already published dramatic works – this emphasises even more the bringing together of disparate voices from throughout the whole oeuvre for very specific effect). The second, a companion piece, evokes a ceremony, a Bacchic pledge to Cupid, the 'tyrant of the heart' (*UTBa*: 7, 7): 'Let us wreath the mighty cup, / Then with song we'll lift it up [...] Through each land his arrows sound, / By his fetters all are bound.' (*UTBa*: 7, 1-2 & 15-16). This highly charged pagan sensibility is evident equally, if not more so, in a poem dealing with the forces of nature rather than with human desire:

O wind, thou hast thy kingdom in the trees,  
And all thy royalties  
Sweep through the land to-day.  
It is mid June,  
And thou, with all thine instruments in tune,  
Thine orchestra  
Of heaving fields, and heavy, swinging fir,  
Strikest a lay  
That doth rehearse  
Her ancient freedom to the universe.  
All other sound in awe  
Repeals its law;  
The bird is mute, the sea  
Sucks up its waves, from rain  
The burthened clouds refrain,  
To listen to thee in thy leafery,  
Thou unconfined,  
Lavish, large, soothing, refluent summer-wind.  
(*UTBa*: 7-8)

When the wind strikes up its instruments of landscape and trees the speaker hears not Wordsworth's 'still, sad music of humanity' (Wordsworth 2000: 134, 92) but a rousing, roaring fugue which trumpets the wind's 'ancient freedom to the universe'. At the sound of the wind's orchestra, all sounds, be they of nature or humanity, fall silent. Nature is a literal law unto itself; it is reassuring in its might, but equally as destructive. The wind is boundless, formless, only visible by the pressures it strikes

upon the landscape and the noises which arise. The form of the poem, so ostensibly free, with a strong, undulating rhythm and rhyme perfectly mirrors the apparent formlessness of the wind, and at the same time its innate rhythmic musicality: it is a beautiful, effective use of form designed to enhance a force which essentially is formless. As Leighton notes, ‘Michael Field’s is [...] essentially an outdoor aestheticism, sharpened by a [...] perspective of life’s impersonality’ (Leighton 1992: 239-40). The sense of the wind’s awful power, its creative energies, subtly echoes Percy Bysshe Shelley’s ‘Ode to the West Wind’: ‘Wild Spirit, which art moving everywhere; / Destroyer and preserver; hear, O hear!’ (Shelley 2002: 299, 13-14).<sup>41</sup> Here, Michael Field is ushering in a strand of pagan lyricism which will spread through the poetic oeuvre beyond this collection and present nature as an unknowable, uncontrollable force, straining the boundaries of both landscape and language, forging a series of love poems to the unfathomable energies of existence.

Following the cosmic ponderings of ‘O wind, thou hast thy kingdom in the trees’, there is a return to the concerns of the heart throughout the remainder of the First Book. Towards its close there are two poems which, through their use of floral imagery to depict female sexuality, leads them to be seen as would-be companion pieces. They are very different in terms of tone and speaker, the first one, ‘An Apple-Flower’, consisting of a single quatrain: ‘I felt my leaves fall free, / I felt the wind and sun, / At my heart a honey-bee: / And life was done’ (*UTBa*: 17). Here, the self, the feminine consciousness, at the very moment of blossoming freedom and sensual experience is curtailed by the end of life, the end of experience, once the bee has invaded the blossom and the flower enters the phase of going to seed. As soon as the act of reproduction has taken place, the body, the female body, is finished with in terms of its ability to experience sensations for their own sake. The masculine presence here is entirely invasive. The image of the body as the short-lived apple-flower only serves to heighten the vulnerability of the female form in the high-stakes enterprise of heterosexual desire. And yet, shortly after this, there comes a poem where the female voice, again comparing herself to a flower – but in this instance the hardier rose – sees herself as anything but a victim at the hands of desiring men:

Ah me, if I grew sweet to man

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<sup>41</sup> There is also a link between Michael Field’s dwelling on the musicality of the wind and Shelley’s own: ‘Make me thy lyre, even as the forest is: / What if my leaves are falling like its own! / The tumult of thy mighty harmonies // Will take from both a deep, autumnal tone’ (Shelley 2002: 300, 57-60).

It was but as a rose that can  
No longer keep the breath that heaves  
And swells among its folded leaves.

The pressing fragrance would unclothe  
The flower, and I became a rose,  
That unimpeachable and fair  
Planted an odour in the air.

No art I used men's love to draw;  
I lived but by my being's law,  
As roses are by heaven designed  
To bring the honey to the wind.

I found there is scant sun in spring,  
I found the blast a riving thing;  
Yet even ruined roses can  
No other than be sweet to man.

(UTBa: 25)

What Michael Field presents here is an amusing monologue where the female, with considerable wit and self-mockery, speaks of herself and her own body as a pleasurable sexual commodity. Not only are the men, like the bees, welcomed in their numbers but the woman, it is implied, enjoys this game of desire and allure as much as they do. She can no more withhold her power to allure than the rose, who is literally blown open with 'pressing fragrance'. This is a powerful image of budding and ripening female sexuality: although society may censure the woman, both she and the rose are only acting as their nature, and their own physical bodies dictate. In this manner the speaker is justifying her promiscuity: if she has become ruined, she was only following the nature of her kind, as all roses must do. And even ruined roses still retain their scent and their sweetness. The gentle erotic lyricism of the opening stanzas hardens in the fourth as the speaker becomes more emphatic in her own defence: sibilance, coupled with elongated, stressed vowels ('scant sun in spring') along with the harsh alliterative 'r' sounds enhance the moral certitude of this speaker. In this manner she hammers home her point: not only is she a being created for pleasure, she can defend her right to it as well. A poem which is richly reminiscent of Campion<sup>42</sup> also bears comparison with Thomas Hardy's 'The Ruined Maid' which shares the same sexual irony and subtle play on 'ruined': "— You left us

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<sup>42</sup> For example, a piece such as 'XV' from his *Second Booke of Ayres*, 'So many loues haue I neglected' (Campion 1967: 141).

in tatters, without shoes or socks, / Tired of digging potatoes, and spudding up docks;  
 / And now you've gay bracelets and bright feathers three!" – / "Yes, that's how we  
 dress when we're ruined," said she' (Hardy 2001: 158, 5-8). In both poems there is  
 no lamentation. In spite of her experience, Michael Field's speaker has fulfilled her  
 purpose in the universal cycle of reproduction and decay, and, having managed like a  
 flower to attain her fair share of what is seen as the pleasure usually reserved for  
 men, retains her allure.<sup>43</sup>

The Second Book continues the theme of love, with a complex variety of  
 female and male speakers, but with a definite darkening of tone as death becomes the  
 more dominant signature note. Amongst the more conventional laments for parted  
 loved ones – some male, some female, such as Robert Browning and Cooper's  
 mother – more ambiguous, even idiosyncratic sentiments emerge. For instance,  
 Death, the thief of youth, the omniscient bereaver, is seen here as Death the giver, the  
 liberator of the soul from restrictive earthly limitations.

This idea informs the audacious piece 'Solitary Death, make me thine own'  
 where the speaker invokes Death to 'make me thine own' in order that they may  
 'wander the bare fields together', 'roving in unembittered unison forever' (*UTBa*: 38,  
 1, 2, 4), having tired of the world, its courtly rounds and rituals: 'To sojourn with thee  
 my soul was bred, / And I, the courtly sights of life refusing, / To the wide shadows  
 fled, / And mused upon thee often as I fell a-musing' (*UTBa*: 38, 9-12). In the final  
 two stanzas, the speaker actively entices Death to play the seducer, to lead them into  
 the waters of a lake, where the two of them can mingle and become one:

To a lone freshwater, where the sea  
 Stirs the silver flux of the reeds and willows,  
 Come thou, and beckon me  
 To lie in the lull of the sand-sequestered billows:

Then take the life I have called my own  
 And to the liquid universe deliver;  
 Loosening my spirit's zone,  
 Wrap round me as thy limbs the wind, the light, the river.

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<sup>43</sup> This poem originally appeared in Act III, scene one of Michael Field's play *The Tragic Mary* (1890), spoken as a monologue by Mary Stuart (*TM*: 94). Placing the poem in *Underneath the Bough* strips it of this context and opens up the field of interpretation, leaving the ending on a more potentially positive note. When the poem was republished in the decreased version of *UTB* later the same year, the final stanza had been excised, removing the sense that the speaker was in any way 'ruined' or tainted by her passionate escapades (*UTBb*: 25). What remained a poem expressing a powerful, instinctual attitude towards desire had nevertheless been tamed somewhat.

The scene of the imagined drowning is painted in very tactile, erotic terms. The linking of the speaker and Death is an entwining of limbs, like the water which swirls around them. In its extremity, it is a poem which almost tips the balance from seriousness to black comedy. To plunge into the water is to come not only face to face with Death, but to be handled, undressed and unfettered, in the way that a lover would be caressed and disrobed. This image of the drowning woman, with the process of dying in the water being akin to a sexual experience was, and would continue to be, an important trope of New Women writing, as the conclusion of Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899) illustrates:

The foamy wavelets curled up to her white feet [...] She walked out. The water was chill, but she walked on. The water was deep, but she lifted her white body and reached out with a long, sweeping stroke. The touch of the sea sensuous, enfolding the body in its soft, close embrace.

(Chopin 2002: 654)

Like Sappho and her many re-incarnations, these fictional women whose desires are frustrated by a wider social order look to death as a release, turning it into an object of desire, a passionate, releasing body. Michael Field here playfully rejects the courtly mannerisms of romantic ritual for something more liberating, more primal. The metaphorical extremes of this poem – with the lover Death as the comforting masculine, erotic force – follows on the early Victorian Sappho suicide cult and prefigures what was still a thematic concern in the work of twentieth century female poets, including Sylvia Plath and Stevie Smith.<sup>44</sup> The trope of the early Victorian woman poet choosing death over despair and dishonour, or in this instance ennui, is given powerful agency as Michael Field turns convention on its head: desire does not lead the speaker to death, the speaker looks to Death for desire, for a form of new life.

In the final poem, 'Thanatos, thy praise I sing', all the play of desire has gone in the place of an invocation to Thanatos, the personified angel of death: 'Come, we would not derogate, / Age and nipping pains we hate, / Take us at our best estate: /

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<sup>44</sup> In the poetry of Stevie Smith (1902-71), Death was often cast as a liberating male romantic figure, as in such pieces as 'Come Death', and 'Do Take Muriel Out': (Smith 1982: 108 & 250).



While the head burns with the crown, / In the battle strike us down!’ (UTBa: 60, 10-14). No slow unfurling towards death for this speaker, no slow winding embrace of lovers, but a quick sharp strike opening up a new land of purity: ‘Come and take us to thy train / Of dead maidens on the plain / Where white lilies have no stain’ (UTBa: 60, 18-21). In this stylised pagan world Thanatos becomes a rival Eros, with the ability of opening up new worlds of purity and ‘unpolluted things’ where ‘endless revellings’ can take place unhindered (UTBa: 60, 26-7). As Angela Leighton has noted, Michael Field takes ‘human love out of the context of courtship and marriage’ and puts it, refreshingly if challengingly ‘in the context of life’s ancient, evolutionary forces’ (Leighton 1992: 233), even if this process inevitably involves some form of death. The poetic mediations on love and death in the First and Second Books, with their courtly postures, varieties of speaker and thematic inconsistencies, their subtle shadings of tone, are an extended prelude for the themes, sentiments and forms which are exhibited in the enticing, enigmatic poems of the Third Book.

### **The Third Book**

The Third Book of poems in *Underneath the Bough* muses upon many of the themes which have occurred in the previous two sections but in terms of imagery and intensity of vision it is unlike anything which has come before in the Michael Field poetic canon. The twenty short lyrics which comprise it can be seen as an independent sequence, in which a narrative of desire – at first unreciprocated, and then finally fulfilled – between an elder speaker and a younger woman is played out. It is possible to see this section as a series of amorous addresses from Bradley to Cooper and, indeed, they have been read in this manner, but not always to the same ends. The first critic to offer any comment on the issue was Mary Sturgeon in 1921, who, while wishing to champion the originality of the poems’ sentiments, also wished to clear any undesirable ambiguities of interpretation:

Michael [Bradley] wrote love-poetry of another kind than the romantic, in a series about her fellow which is probably unique in literature. It will be found in the third book of *Underneath the Bough* [...] These poems are a record of her devotion to Edith Cooper, and it is doubtful whether Laura or Beatrice or the Dark Lady had a tenderer wooing. They explain, of course, the slightness of a more usual (or, as some would put it, a more

normal) love-interest in Michael's work. But it need not be supposed that there was anything abnormal in this devotion. On the contrary, it was the expression of her mother-instinct, the outflow of the natural feminine impulse to cherish and protect. And this she herself realized perfectly. . . .

(Sturgeon 1921: 74-5)

While drawing comparisons with Shakespeare and Dante, Sturgeon is at pains to limit a reading which sees the poems as sexual/romantic expressions from one woman to another. Sturgeon's very deliberate act of obscuring the erotic drive of the poems was designed to protect the work from prejudice, or charges of 'abnormality', but in the end it is too limiting. By contrast, later critics, free of the homophobic climate of the early twentieth century, have focused upon the 'lesbian' aspects of the poems to the detriment of more subtle tones of feeling. Sturgeon is right in noticing the maternal aspects of the Third Book, which herald the return of one of Michael Field's central motifs: the mother as lover, and vice versa. Ivor Treby's catalogue shows that we can, with a degree of certainty, attribute the work almost solely to Bradley, though of course this is never wholly the case at this moment in the career of Michael Field. But even this theme of joint textuality is woven into the thematic tapestry of these twenty poems. Though, like Shakespeare's sonnets, they can always be read as individual pieces revealing an array of speakers instead of just one narrative entity, I choose to see them as a deliberate sequence where one half of the Michael Field persona momentarily breaks away from the other for the first time, not as an act of selfishness or self-liberation, but in order to reinforce the romantic and aesthetic bonds which unite to form Michael Field. At one and the same time it is a highly stylised, crafted series of addresses which border upon the nakedly personal. Chris White sees many of the poems in this collection as constituting 'part of the private discourse of the journals' (White 1996a: 51). What results is an astonishing performance where manifold desires, artistic, maternal, sororal, sexual meet and enmesh in a new, highly personal language of passion, uttered in that posturing, loud courtly whisper, creating an intensity unique in women's poetry at this time.

The opening poem, 'When high Zeus first peopled earth' unfurls like a fairy tale, a creation myth. In the beginning, all men and women were literally equal in a state of constantly pleasurable childhood, tended by the forces of nature: 'Doves and bees / Tended their soft infancies: / Hand to hand they tossed the ball' (*UTBa*: 65, 4-6). However, despite this lack of care, with no one to stand by and appreciate the play

of the children, everything quickly becomes monotonous: ‘none smiled to see the play, / Nor stood aside / In pride / And pleasure of their youthful day. / All waxed gray’ (*UTBa*: 65, 7-11). In this idyll, there is no variety of feeling. As an answer, Zeus introduces generational difference, whereby the aged can counsel the young from experience; the young in turn can brighten the aged by being a living embodiment of their own past. Turning from a simple lyric into something more dramatic, the speaker then turns from a third person voice to address another in the second person:

Dear, is not the story’s truth  
Most manifest?  
Had our lives been twinned, forsooth,  
We had never had one heart:  
By time set a space apart,  
We are bound by such close ties  
None can tell of either breast  
The native sigh  
Who try  
To learn with whom the muse is guest.  
(*UTBa*: 66, 33-42)

This story which opens the poem has been a game, an elaborate ploy to engage the addressee and strengthen the case which the speaker makes here in the third stanza. What links the speaker and the beloved are not their similarities, but their differences, personal and generational. There is the almost paradoxical idea that had their lives been closer in age, they would not have had ‘one heart’; this tight-winding together of personalities is only made possible by what they bring together to make one whole personality. It is not possible to discern from the poem alone the gender of the speaker or the addressee; it is left tantalisingly – and also safely – open. But there is something deeply intimate yet elliptical in the lines ‘None can tell of either breast [...] with whom the muse is guest.’ This is no ordinary courtly ploy to entice an increasingly indifferent lover; the relation between the two is an artistic one: they are both writers, hosts of the muse. As already noted in Chapter Two (p. 59), Bradley had told Havelock Ellis: ‘the work is perfect mosaic: we cross and interlace like a company of dancing summer flies’ (Bradley in Sturgeon 1921: 47). Not every poem was a ‘perfect mosaic’ of Bradley and Cooper’s voices, but Bradley was intent for people to see them as such. What can be taken as sisterly or maternal feelings

between the speakers in this poem – if taken as two women – can be seen as having more engrained romantic and even sexual undercurrents.

If the opening poem forms a kind of aesthetic manifesto whereby the relations of the elder speaker to the younger love object are laid bare and praised, what follows is often a more anxious, sometimes pained plea to the silent beloved. In ‘Already to my eyelids shore’, the speaker employs all of the stock effects of the courtship lyric in a short eleven line piece to enforce the reasons why the two must not part: ‘I dare not let thee leave me sweet, / Lest it should be for ever; / Tears dew my kisses ere we meet, / Foreboding we must sever’ (*UTBa*: 67, 5-8). This is deeply reminiscent of the Atthis poem, ‘XIV’, from *Long Ago*: ‘a great fear and passion shook / My heart lest haply thou wert dead’ (*LA*: 22, 3-4). In this lachrymose vale of tears, where meeting and parting bring their own special grief, the speaker offers the swift, simple conclusion which will put an end to all need for gestures of hail and farewell: ‘Since we can neither meet nor part, / Methinks the moral is, sweetheart, / That we must dwell together’ (*UTBa*: 67, 9-11). On the surface, the speaker has reached a moment in the sequence, though quite early, where they are compelled openly to display their fears of parting from the beloved. And yet behind this can be seen the private anxieties of Bradley at a time when Cooper – if not literally on the point of leaving with Berenson – was at least dramatising herself in the journal as having to make a choice between two loves: one domestic, feminine and familiar, the other darkly masculine, foreign and mysterious.

In ‘A girl’, the speaker has reached a point when they leave off from addressing the loved one directly, and attempts instead to draw a small, protean cameo portrait of shifting images:

A girl,  
Her soul a deep-wave pearl  
Dim, lucent of all lovely mysteries;  
A face flowered for heart’s ease,  
A brow’s grace soft as seas  
Seen through faint forest-trees:  
A mouth, the lips apart,  
Like aspen-leaflets trembling in the breeze  
From her tempestuous heart.  
Such: and our souls so knit,  
I leave a page half-writ –  
The work begun  
Will be to heaven’s conception done,

If she come to it.

(*UTBa*: 68)

The lover, here identified as a young girl, is depicted through a series of images taken from nature: the vision of her soul, rare, lustrous, melts into one of her face, flower-like, open, in full-blown beauty. Her brow and her lips then meld into the landscape and the trees, glimpsed tentatively, moving and tended by the breezes issuing from her heart. She is at once a beautiful object – a flower, a jewel – and also, at the same time the very landscape that the speaker gazes on and inhabits: the very air they breathe. The effect of this is intensely visual and sensual, and at the same time the image is constantly on the move: ‘The wave effect of the metre here subtly reproduces the very tentative outline of the girl herself, who is seen, as if underwater’ (Leighton 1992: 231-2). Then, pausing as it were in mid flow, the speaker leaves ‘a page half-writ’, in waiting for the other to ‘come to it’ and complete the text which is intended to stand as a monument of the elder’s love and the collaborative signature. In this manner they are at one in the aesthetic realm, consummating their relations, mingling their separate voices in the act of writing. This is a dramatic and quite daring moment: neither Shakespeare nor Dante leaves off from their wooings to allow the other, the Dark Lady, Beatrice, to have their say. They either remain vocally indifferent, or are frozen out by the controlling masculine voice. Here, in Michael Field’s poem, is a love of shared voices – a more feminine atmosphere of openness – reminiscent of Sappho’s school of poetic maidens, united in song. It also teases the reader as to the duality behind the Michael Field guise. This is Michael Field turning inwards, becoming both the object and the subject at the same time. The writing is left in waiting for the other voice, to entice completion. But what the reader has, therefore, is an uncompleted poem, arrested in a moment of permanent stasis where the other never comes. Marion Thain is quite right in asserting that the poem ‘fails in its attempt to invoke reciprocal dialogue’ (Thain 2007b: 100). There is, elliptically inherent within the dramatic touches of this small lyric, the implication that the younger woman may not so readily ‘come to it’. This page remains ‘half-writ’.

A compelling companion to this poem is ‘Methinks my love to thee doth grow’, where the speaker lays down as proof of her/his growing love for the younger woman the fact that he/she is no longer jealous of the time that the other spends away

with a third party, the 'Muse': 'I see thy soul turn to her hidden grot, / And follow not; / Content thou shouldst prefer / To be with her' (*UTBa*: 69-70, 13-16). This female muse is a thing of air as opposed to a thing of flesh, but nevertheless the speaker is resigned to the fact that this is the young girl's chief object of desire, and that although she may come second in this regard, as 'my royal moment's guest' (*UTBa*: 70, 25), they may still enjoy the physicality of the love object as compensation. At this moment the speaker is content with being 'Live to the Best!' (*UTBa*: 70, 26), but the mingling of artistic voices here in united song seems to be absent. This is also a covert comment on the shifting power structures within the aesthetic make-up of 'Michael Field' at this time. Although there were still moments of close collaboration, there was increasingly a move to separation which clearly entailed pain and compromise, but which did not completely threaten the continuation of writing. In the case of the Third Book, it positively inspired it.

The mode of the speaker declaring his or her love which remains to a degree unrequited is continued in later poems. 'Love's Sour Leisure' (*UTBa*: 72-4) is a nuanced evocation of the sentiments in Andrew Marvell's 'To His Coy Mistress.' But a significant change comes towards the close of the sequence in a few poems which suggest a more fulfilling and reciprocal artistic and romantic relationship between the elder and the younger poets in a language that is direct, visceral and elemental:

The love that breeds  
In my heart for thee!  
As the iris is full, brimful of seeds,  
And all that it flowered for among the reeds  
Is packed in a thousand vermillion-beads  
That push, and riot, and squeeze, and clip,  
Till they burst the sides of the silver scrip,  
And at last we see  
What the bloom, with its tremulous, bowery fold  
Of zephyr-petal at heart did hold:  
So my breast is rent  
With the burthen and strain of its great content;  
For the summer of fragrance and sighs is dead,  
The harvest secret is burning red,  
And I would give thee, after my kind,  
The final issues of heart and mind.  
(*UTBa*: 77-8)

This poem entitled 'Unbosoming' is quite arresting within the canon of late Victorian women's verse in the way that it marries a rhythmic, fluid formalism with a heavily

charged eroticism that manages to convey, almost in a new vocabulary of desire, the physical passion felt by one woman for another. The true skill of this poem is that the sultry, baroque epiphany manages to successfully communicate this particular passion in such a natural, frank, and innocent manner which avoids any form of descent into the overheated, sweaty and sensationalised sensuality of Baudelaire or Swinburne. The poem consists of just two sentences: the first a declaration of a love that dwells in the breast of the speaker for the beloved; the second a long, unwinding progression of clauses which carry the reader, buoyed on by their undulating rhythms, through a luminous montage of imagery. The poem is packed with a semantic field of energy and movement: ‘push,’ ‘riot,’ ‘squeeze,’ ‘burst’. This is an orgasmic moment where love, having been implanted and nurtured in the heart, can no longer be held within any boundaries: the ‘harvest-secret’ must out. Through the emphasis on roundness – of the seeds, the seed-pod – a lexicon is created straight from nature, from flowers, to find a means of expressing sexuality in a tender, regenerative, non-phallic language. Chris White has noted: ‘Unlike heterosexual reproduction of human lives, the fertility delineated in Michael Field’s verse produces a sensuality which is mutually sustaining and life giving’ (White 1996a: 58). This use of flower imagery to express sexuality between women comes as just the latest in a long line of pieces which have stretched from the opening of *The New Minnesinger*. But ‘Unbosoming’ manages to reach new heights of overt eroticism, which accommodates the possibilities of a same-sex reading.

The tone of pleading in the sequence, of fear and compromise, has gone. What remains is far more positive, open, and revolutionary, particularly in what has come to be seen as Bradley and Cooper’s sexual and aesthetic manifesto:

It was deep April, and the morn  
 Shakespeare was born;  
 The world was on us, pressing sore;  
 My Love and I took hands and swore,  
 Against the world, to be  
 Poets and lovers evermore,  
 To laugh and dream on Lethe’s shore,  
 To sing to Charon in his boat,  
 Heartening the timid souls afloat;  
 Of judgement never to take heed,  
 But to those fast-locked souls to speed,  
 Who never from Apollo fled,  
 Who spent no hour among the dead;

Continually  
With them to dwell  
Indifferent to heaven and hell.  
(UTBa: 79)

Here, the speaker and their 'Love', on the birthday of Shakespeare – also famed for the composition of homoerotic lyrics – take hands and effectively make marriage vows, both to each other and their poetic vocation. This is to be a union that places them even more 'against the world', but one which will allow them to laugh openly in the face of humanity and mortality, to be indifferent to judgement, and to sing of their freedom not only to themselves but equally to their more 'timid' passengers. Life is a boat journey to the shores of death; with mutual companionship, these two lover-poets are able to sing openly on this veritable ship of fools against society and organised religion, choosing instead to celebrate the pagan forces of life and passion and to hearten any fellow passengers who may be privileged enough to listen in along the way. The journal of Bradley and Cooper testifies that this poem was based upon a real event, that it is rooted in biography and the private relations between the two women who comprised Michael Field, but beyond this, the poem, in its position near the close of the Third Book, discloses that the relationship depicted between the elder and younger poet-lovers has survived and has achieved a new high-point, a marriage, where love and art can endlessly cross and interconnect.

Angela Leighton has also claimed of the poems in the Third Book that they represent a repudiation of courtly mannerisms and tropes, that they have 'no truck with any of its suing and pleading, buying and denying' (Leighton 1992: 232). This somewhat oversimplifies the case. What Michael Field brings to the courtly lyric, to the sequence of poems dealing with an unrequited desire, is a sense of eventual fulfilment, of an erotic union in place of a happy ending that the Elizabethan courtly tradition perpetually eluded.

The Third Book of *Underneath the Bough*, with its sexual and aesthetic innovations, was to have a valuable legacy, not just among critics, but most vitally perhaps upon the writing of the twentieth century American poet Amy Lowell. Lowell, one of the founder members of the Imagist movement, lived for many years with her partner, the actress, Ada Dwyer Russell, at Lowell's estate in Boston. Throughout Lowell's collections of verse there runs a seam of highly charged erotic lyrics which seemingly deal with her love for Russell in a way which is more direct



than Michael Field's lyrics, but at the same time is also obscured slightly by the blurring of the gender of the speaker. But the addressee is definitely feminine, and the terms which are used to evoke the passion between the two – images taken from the home and from the garden – are deeply evocative of the Third Book of *Underneath the Bough*. Indeed, there is a sequence of poems at the heart of her collection *Pictures of the Floating World* (1919) which bears many similarities with Michael Field's work, not only in terms of homoeroticism, but in a usage of seemingly innocent imagery to explore what were, at the dawn of the 1920s, dangerously subversive desires:

I put your leaves aside,  
One by one;  
The stiff, broad outer leaves;  
The smaller ones,  
Pleasant to touch, veined with purple;  
The glazed inner leaves.  
One by one  
I parted you from your leaves,  
Until you stood up like a white flower  
Swaying slightly in the evening wind.  
(Lowell 1919: 51, 1-10)

This first stanza of 'The Weather-Cock Points South' is arrestingly candid when placed at the side of Michael Field's lyrics. What Lowell seems to take from Michael Field is not only the possibility of writing poems expressing love between two women, but a mode of imagery which could be used to do this: one that is natural, refreshing, domestic, culled from the garden, a revived 'Jacobean tradition', states Lillian Faderman, 'where Eros is central' (Faderman 2004: 64). The legacy of Michael Field's Third Book to modernist lesbian poetics, I would argue, is very real.

### **The Fourth Book**

The Fourth Book does not feel as strongly thematic as its predecessors. Rather, it contains elements of them all. However, as Robert P. Fletcher has noted, it is possible to discern two narrative strands at work here, at least in the opening passages of the book: 'I find two love-plots to work simultaneously, suspended in play through the Fourth Book: a narrative of sustained same-sex desire that won't go away, but also a sequence that celebrates heterosexual relations and urges the

relinquishment of the younger by the elder woman' (Fletcher 1999: 172). While I agree with Fletcher about the co-existence of two narratives, one heterosexual, one apparently homosexual, I disagree about the outcome, certainly the implication that the elder woman is to relinquish the younger for a male lover. What the Fourth Book does is to take the narrative of the Third Book, complicate it, but add the essential duality (or all-inclusiveness) of desire which is a hallmark of Michael Field's work. The Third Book gave just one half, here the two are back together, merging, pushing apart, and creating at times a revolutionary formalism which sets Michael Field at the forefront of the aesthetic avant-garde.

As the Fourth Book opens, there are a small cluster of pieces which speak of a love for a male love object:

I live in the world for his sake,  
For the eyes that sleep and wake,  
I live in the world for his eyes:  
Earth's kingdoms may pass away,  
I heed not these things of clay,  
But I live, I love, I pray  
From the light of his eyes.  
(UTBa: 88)

This is the first time in *Underneath the Bough* that the subject of the speaker's desire is seen as being undeniably male. The active speaker is the passive love object, existing merely for the 'eyes', the aesthetic satisfaction, of the man. There is no attempt to address him directly as there is in the poems to the younger woman, and likewise there is no attempt to describe his physical attributes, as was common with the young men in *Sight and Song* and the ones described in Bradley and Cooper's journal. This male lover, if he can indeed qualify as such, is omniscient, giving little in return for all this professed emotional sacrifice and devotion. It is tempting to see the figure of Berenson behind this piece, his emotional disturbance of the Michael Field relationship leaving a very palpable print upon the fabric of *Underneath the Bough*. This can be seen again in the following poem, 'Across a gaudy room':

Across a gaudy room  
I looked and saw his face,  
Beneath the sapless palm-trees, in the gloom  
Of that distressing place,  
Where everyone sat tired,  
Where talk itself grew stale,

Where, as the day began to fail,  
No guest had just the power required  
To rise and go: I strove with my disgust;  
But at the sight of him my eyes were fired  
To give one glance, as though they must  
Be sociable with what they found of fair  
And free and simple in a chamber where  
Life was so base.

(*UTBa*: 88, 1-14)

Here it is the speaker offering his or her gaze as a means of communicated romantic desire amidst social disaffection to the male love object. This gaze is soon reciprocated, unseen by the others present. The two may not meet, but, like two stars, may twinkle their recognition to each other, communicating softly their love of ‘two souls forbidden to draw near’ (*UTBa*: 89, 27). The surroundings in the poem, that of the literary salon, could be seen as evoking the scene where Bradley and Cooper first met Berenson, at a meeting of the trans-Atlantic poet and socialite Louise Chandler-Moulton (Hughes 2007: 117-25). This is the classic courtly scenario of covert gazes and frustrated feelings but all wrapped-up among the chintz, chatter and potted palms of a Victorian drawing-room. The poem itself is not altogether successful, being rather prosaic and as stilted as the social atmosphere it professes to abhor, and yet there still remains something about the sentiment, the questioning of this stasis, which is movingly communicated through the image of the constant stars. Again, there is no physical description of the man, just the eyes, and the invigorating sense of his presence. It is also interesting to note that these poems which treat of a male lover do not only avoid direct communication, they are not placed within nature, but within the drawing-room. The expression of a heterosexual desire places the speaker directly within the forms of social convention. But there is also another dimension to these works. Though Berenson may have provided the impetus, the experience for these feelings, the speaker could, after all, be male. Indeed, there is little in the poem to suggest that he is not; the sentiments perfectly mirroring the games of desire and pursuit which Wilde and his circle would have carried out amidst such scenes at this time. ‘Michael Field’ allows Bradley and Cooper to subvert heterosexual convention, while at the same time the shifting personae of lyric poetry coupled with the knowledge of their female identity at this time allow ‘Michael Field’ to escape charges of immorality. But this bi-sexual outlook only further serves to deepen the

discursive threads of desire for the male and the female which had pervaded Bradley and Cooper's work right from the beginning.

Though Fletcher believes there is no culmination to this narrative strand of desire towards a male love object, it co-exists, quite comfortably, with a continuation of the possible same-sex outpourings to a female lover from Book Three: 'I have found her power! / From her roving eyes / Just a gift of blue, / That away she threw / As a girl that may throw a flower' (*UTBa*: 120, 1-5). Despite the parallel existence of the dual male/female strands, there is a feeling of irresolution behind the scenes, where Cooper's allegiances remained torn for many years – the best part of the remainder of the nineties – between Bradley and Berenson. While *Underneath the Bough* turns these personal emotions and differences into high art, where one voice breaks away in order to woo back the other, the disturbance Berenson represents is perhaps one of the reasons why there would be a major poetic hiatus. The dramatised breaks in voice and the dual sexual desires became for a while very real.

Quite apart from the narrative structure, what the Fourth Book reveals of greatest importance is the emergence of a new poetics. The evidence is brief, but its effect is startling for a work published in 1893. The poem which best demonstrates these new qualities is the piece entitled 'Cyclamens':

They are terribly white:  
There is snow on the ground,  
And a moon on the snow at night;  
The sky is cut by the winter light;  
Yet I, who have all these things in ken,  
Am struck to the heart by the chiselled white  
Of this handful of cyclamen.  
(*UTBa*: 108)

The poem is short, brittle, and cuts like the sharpness of white on white, of ice and the ghostly light thrown back to the winter sky. The reader is presented with two images, of the flowers and of the snow-scene; rather than comparing them through simile, they rest side by side. Although we learn that the speaker is struck more by the flowers than the snow, the images stick together, to the extent that they become one and the same thing: the flowers evoke the winter scene, and vice versa. What we have here is the germ which would later flourish as Imagism in the works of Pound, Lowell, and most notably, H.D., whose poem 'Oread' mirrors the technique of Michael Field's piece:

Whirl up, sea –  
Whirl up your pointed pines,  
Splash your great pines  
On our rocks,  
Hurl your green over us,  
Cover us with your pools of fir.  
(H.D. 1983: 55)

There is a complete blurring of the boundaries here between the sea and the pines on the horizon. Where H.D.'s poem succeeds more as a piece of Imagism is in the complete suppression of a discerning subjective sensibility. What Peter Jones has said of this poem is equally applicable to Michael Field's: 'There are no similes in the poem [...] presentation rather than representation; no moralizing tone; no reflection on human experience [...] no vagueness of abstractions' (Jones 1972 [2001]: 31). It may be inaccurate to claim 'Cyclamens' as an Imagist poem proper, or Michael Field as the first Imagist, but the groundwork is definitely there, whether the major figures of the movement were aware of it or not. There are few lyrics like this, but it is still a heavy irony that while Bradley and Cooper would become wracked with anxiety over the 'modernity' of this volume they were producing work and playing with techniques which would have found greater encouragement thirty years later.

### **Reception and Recasting of the *Bough***

After the appearance of *Underneath the Bough* in May of 1893, the professed confidence of Bradley and Cooper as they prepared the book just months earlier began to evaporate. Critics were very slow to review the collection, which points to the growing apathy towards Michael Field which had accumulated since the revelation of dual female authorship. Feeling that one of the reasons for this neglect was a fulfilment of Berenson's strictures about writing neo-Elizabethan verse, Bradley and Cooper began negotiations with their publisher to produce quickly a radically revised and decreased edition. Communicating her plans and her hurt to John Miller Gray, Bradley wrote in early July: 'The publisher is loath to begin before a [simple/single?]<sup>45</sup> review has appeared [...] I cannot understand why Michael's friends thus withhold aid. The silence of the Atheneum + the Academy is simply

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<sup>45</sup> This word is not clear in the manuscript.

ruining Michael's wordly prospects [...] + embittering his heart.'<sup>46</sup> Bradley went as far as asking Gray to write a review for them, to ease the impasse with their publisher. Later in the same letter she would seek his further guidance in crafting the new edition: 'We are thinking of including in a new Bough 60 poems instead of 112. We shall like to sound you out first, or if you wd. mark out 60 in your copy.'<sup>47</sup> Gray would oblige on both points. His review, appearing in *The Academy* on 22 July, recognises the connections between *Underneath the Bough* and its position relative to the previous collections and yet notes a new expressiveness, a maturity, only hinted at before: 'the present volume [...] is pervaded by qualities which, while they by no means appear here for the first time, yet certainly are here more recurrent than hitherto: do certainly find here the most sustained as well as the most clear and perfect expression they have yet reached' (Gray 1893: 65). He also noted the variety of form and influence, old and new: 'Michael Field is [...] a curious student of all the fine and expressive ways of verse, and of the artists, old and new, who have devised or employed the most varied poetical tools' (Gray 1893: 65). In gratitude, Bradley wrote two days later on 24 July: 'I am so glad you have discovered where the real significance of the book lies.'<sup>48</sup>

The book was to receive another important review on 9 September in *The Athenaeum*. This piece is even more glowing than Gray's praise, authored by Augusta Webster. More fluent than Gray, with a greater feel for metaphor and the poetic canon, Webster hones in with precision on the true merits of the work:

The intellectual strength and originality – the acquired mannerism – the rich condensed expression – the fine intensity, planned and dominantly present, yet skilfully kept half concealed – the splendid control of metre, coupled with the inability, or more probably the want of wish, to fascinate by the melody of balanced cadences and with the preference for the grace of quaint and skilful mingled stiffness – are, while always recognizable in any of Michael Field's songs and brief separate lyrics, brought into still stronger prominence as essential characteristics by the close kindred resemblance apparent when these poems are grouped together.

(Webster 1893: 345)

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<sup>46</sup> Field, Michael, BL. MS. Add. MS. 45854, vol. 4, *fols.* 176r – 177r [Exact date unclear]

<sup>47</sup> *ibid.* *fol.* 178v.

<sup>48</sup> *ibid.* From a letter from Bradley to Gray dated July 24 1893, *fol.* 185v – 186v

Webster hits upon two of the main triumphs of the collection: its formal brilliance and the sophistication which is brought out through the subtle linkages and narrative threads which course through the text. She talks at great length about the Elizabethan qualities of the work, noting ‘The sad heart of the nineteenth century speaks through this later Elizabethan’ (Webster 1893: 346), before wryly concluding that ‘to most readers the peculiar interest [...] will lie in the suggestion of the two lives, not twin, but with one heart’ (Webster 1893: 346).

Had Bradley and Cooper received such unalloyed praise sooner and in more abundance they might never have considered a new edition. But just two days after Webster’s review appeared, they drafted an explanatory Preface:

It is only fair to our readers to state that the bough to whose shade we re-invite them is in some of its features altered since the spring. It has received careful pruning from our own, and from more skilful hands, and has of itself shot forth several fresh twigs. But, as it is fed by the same life as heretofore, and retains all characteristic outlines of foliage, we hold ourselves justified in maintaining its identity. It is the veritable bough of this year’s April.

(*UTBb* 1893: v)

This Preface acts as a form of damage-limitation. The book is reduced from 124 poems to 72, four of which are new. Although many of the poems are the same, the effect of the collection as a whole could not be more different. The biggest change is the loss of the four book structure and a re-ordering of many of the poems. They are largely the same texts, but the tale has changed significantly. The poems to male and female objects of desire are still there, but the subtle, teasing eroticism of the Third Book, as well as the dual narratives of the Fourth Book, have gone. The focus is placed upon the poems as individual entities. As Joseph Bristow states, ‘what began as a literary-historical exercise in invoking and rethinking Elizabethan lyric’ was transformed into something ‘set adrift from the intelligible structure’ of the traditional song-book (Bristow 2007: 57). Ironically, while attempting to make the work more ‘modern’, it loses that modern conceptual play with the Elizabethan song-book structure where echoes of Campion and his peers mixed with Michael Field’s own past and present voices and created something arrestingly unique in form and effect.

The third edition, published by Thomas B. Mosher in Maine, 1898, goes some way to appeasing the original intentions for the work. The song-book structure is reinstated – now with five books – consisting of ninety-nine poems, many of them, particularly from the Fifth Book, being new pieces. What the collection regains in structure it loses in its type-face, which now no longer has an archaic Elizabethan elegance, and there is also a stronger pagan sensibility, taking it closer to Decadence than before. But what this edition manages to do is bring Michael Field's fascination with this book to an end, and begin the move towards new poetic growth. While *Underneath the Bough* contains many poems from previous works, the third edition contains poems which will appear again in *Wild Honey from Various Thyme* (1908), thus demonstrating a vibrant cross-pollination of form and theme in the poetic oeuvre. Therefore, the oeuvre, as a cycle, frequently brings itself back into new life: it is a more organic entity than it may first appear. In the final poem of the Fifth Book, 'Renewal' – which will later reappear in *Wild Honey* – the speaker rises phoenix-like from the ashes of a turbulent past, primed for the future:

So joyously I lift myself above  
 The life I buried in hot flames today;  
 The flames themselves are dead – and I can range  
 Alone through the untarnished sky I love,  
 And trust myself, as from the grave one may,  
 To the enchanting miracles of change.  
(UTBc: 93, 9-14)

Berenson proved to be a challenging external force which would test the women's relation to each other and their art: 'he [...] forced them to consider the relation between lived experience and art' (Vicinus 2005: 331). Painful though it proved, it is a period which they would ultimately transcend. But regaining a point of shared poetic confidence entailed a long period in the nineties where, as the next chapter will show, more 'modern' forms of poetic composition would supplant more traditional ones. In a final analysis, though, it has to be said that *Underneath the Bough*, even through the periods of its Heraclitean change, marks the height of Michael Field's powers. Not only does it constantly encourage the readers to assess the ways in which they read lyric poetry in so far as the interpretation of speakers and sequences is concerned, it also prefigures a revolutionary female poetic modernism, both in terms of aesthetics and sexuality, which would have fallen on more fertile soil in the circles



of the trans-Atlantic avant-garde of the 1920s than it ever did in England during the final years of the nineteenth century.

## **Chapter 5. ‘For That Moment Only’: The Poetics of Prose**

In a letter to Ernest Dowson on 30 June 1897, Oscar Wilde praised the younger man’s ‘words with wings’, calling his poetic ability ‘an exquisite gift, and fortunately rare in an age whose prose is more poetic than its poetry’ (Wilde 2000: 908). This comment is a touch ironic, perhaps, from the man who – almost more than any other at the *fin de siècle* – did so much to elevate English prose to the same prestigious status as English verse. In a literary culture where for so long prose composition and publication had been geared towards mass commercial consumption – particularly in the manifold journals and periodicals which flourished throughout the nineteenth century – it had been a convenient, sometimes essential means of writers making their name and even, in the case of minor and female writers, a living. By the 90s, the perfection of a beautiful prose form which could equal the aesthetic of poetry, capable of intellectual discourse, yet equally capable of exalting its own essential uselessness became the goal to strive for. Following on from the example of Pater, the aesthetic criticism of Wilde, Vernon Lee, Max Beerbohm and George Moore stands technical comparison with the finest poetry of the decade. Out of this new culture of prose composition the boundaries of genre became more flexible: high criticism, autobiography, fiction and fact all blended together. All of this provided fertile terrain for the brief growth and flourishing of that newest, rarest and most perplexing of literary phenomena: the prose poem.

During this period, from the close of the eighteen-eighties to the middle period of the nineties – exactly coinciding with the incarceration of Wilde – Bradley and Cooper would experiment to a significant, often surprising degree with the driving prose trends of the day. Aside from the continual, quotidian composition of their journal, they wrote a series of increasingly experimental prose pieces which they intended to publish as Michael Field. Between 1887 and 1890, they wrote and published one short story and three essays in the periodical press.<sup>49</sup> In 1893, following the steady praise of their verse closet-dramas, they staged a full length play in prose, *A Question of Memory*, which closed almost immediately following a disastrous reception from the critics (Donoghue 1998: 82). At this time until 1895

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<sup>49</sup> ‘An Old Couple’ (1887); ‘Mid-Age’ (1889); ‘A Lumber-Room’ (1890) and ‘Effigies’ (1890). The first three texts appeared in *The Contemporary Review*, with ‘Effigies’ appearing in *The Art Review*.

they began designing and writing a series of *croquis* (sketches), or prose poems, under the working title of 'For That Moment Only'. This project, though finished in manuscript, was never published.

To date, the significance of prose experimentation, and the prose poem in particular, has been overlooked in Michael Field studies. What amounts in the end to little more than an experiment grew from a time in the life and career of Bradley and Cooper when the unity of Michael Field's poetic voice had come to be challenged, even significantly affected by outside forces. Following on from the fractured voices of *Underneath the Bough*, they would not publish another verse drama until *Attila, My Attila!* in 1896, nor another volume of lyric poetry until 1908. Therefore, the three year period spent writing 'For That Moment Only' shows how seriously prose was being taken as a potential new direction for Michael Field at this time. The writing of prose essays with the intention of publication had started off conventionally enough, but soon began to take an increasingly experimental, innovative path. Although the resulting short prose poems were never published, they point nevertheless to Bradley and Cooper's experimental, eclectic approach to form, and their status as writers who were, in their quiet, anonymous way, probing the boundaries of the avant-garde, actively seeking new bottles for their rare literary wines.

Michael Field's prose compositions between 1893 and 1895 illustrate the formal and thematic development of the poetic oeuvre at a period when their publication of lyric poetry had stopped, and when the personal and artistic relationship between Bradley and Cooper was being reconfigured. An analysis of these works reveals a great deal about the various and sometimes surprising influences at work upon Michael Field, as well as proving these works to be a missing piece of the puzzle in the story of the 1890s prose poem form in English, and perhaps demonstrating some of the reasons why it did not flourish in the way it perhaps could have done.

### **'For That Moment Only'**

After the death of John Miller Gray in 1894, one of the many artefacts which he bequeathed to Bradley and Cooper in his will was the original manuscript of 'Effigies', elegantly bound, and with the published version appended to the end. This beautiful document, as much an emblem of Gray's admiration for his friends' works,

is deposited in the Bodleian Library. Attached within the front cover are the letters exchanged between the two relating to the composition of the essay and Cooper's confessed awkwardness when it comes to writing prose:

The proof of Effigies has been sent off this Sabbath morning after labour and sorrow of revision. My opening sentence always displeases me; it was the convulsive plunge with which one takes to a new element – and from prose I always recoil as I do from touch of the sea (What would Mr. Swinburne say to this!) [...] But I have made confession before now of my incorrigible disdain for prose; so that I cannot consistently levy forces in its behalf.<sup>50</sup>

William Hazlitt, in 'On the Prose-Style of Poets', pre-empted Cooper's anxiety over adapting to an alien literary form: 'Poets are winged animals, and can cleave the air, like birds [...] but [...] when they light upon the ground of prose and matter-of-fact, they seem not to have the same use of their feet' (Hazlitt 1998: 1). When Cooper received her manuscript back, and having read its contents afresh after a break of many years, beauty was not the first thing which came to her mind: 'my Effigies lovingly bound – MS and printed form. Horror of re-reading it! I am as much parted from it as a ghost from his old home – I laugh at my heavy prose, I am bored by it, + I am horrified at it! ... Today we thank the Lord that the years that produced Effigies were eaten – They are well restored in For That Moment Only!'<sup>51</sup> Here again is the voice of displeasure, of recoil, mentioned in the letter of 1890, but now with heightened irony. But not even the embarrassment of re-reading this old text, with its perennial 'convulsive plunge' into the unsettling 'new element' of prose, was enough to dampen confidence in the new project, the restored, more mature prose of what would become 'For That Moment Only'.

It was to be straight after the bad experience of staging the critically slated prose drama *A Question of Memory* in 1893 that Bradley and Cooper, at the suggestion of Bernard Berenson (Treby 1998: 84), began to write short prose sketches, *croquis*. Between 1893 and 1895, approximately thirty of these *croquis* were written. Eighteen pieces were then collected together into two 'series' under the title of 'For That Moment Only'. These texts were never published, despite the professed enthusiasm for the project and their frequent appearance in the journal

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<sup>50</sup> Field, Michael, Bodleian MS.ENG.MISC.d.973

<sup>51</sup> Field, Michael, BL. Add. MS. 46782, 1894, fol. 132v

between 1893 and 1895. This document consists of 71 loose manuscript sheets, ordered into two sequences named 'First' and 'Second' series. The handwriting consists of two different hands, though one appears to be more frequent: that of Edith Cooper. Treby in his catalogue attempts to assign authorship to each separate piece, and the majority do seem to belong to Cooper, but, as he mentions of their compositional process: 'Both women, apart from "weeding each other's garden", copied out both their own and the other's poems in a series of notebooks. Handwriting alone is no sure indication of authorship' (Treby 1998: 108). Almost all pieces are signed Michael Field. Clearly, 'he' was again intended as the author, regardless of collaborative input, and shall be treated as such in my ensuing analysis.

Although never published, the writing and collation of these short prose sketches, even their fated obscurity, offers an insight into the literary and cultural phenomenon of the strange and shifting genre of the 'prose poem' in nineteenth-century Britain. I shall briefly outline the history of this form, or splicing of seemingly oppositional forms in the nineteenth century before considering 'For That Moment Only' in the context of the faltering English prose poem tradition. This strange, highly engaging work shows Michael Field's ability to be at the forefront of the literary avant-garde, exploring and expanding familiar themes, stretching the boundaries of genre, even to the extent of becoming one of the unmentioned casualties when the prose poem suddenly assumed a dangerous significance in the summer of 1895.

But, before proceeding further, it is perhaps important to try and quantify what exactly a prose poem is, and, more importantly, what the term would have meant to writers at the *fin de siècle*. Critical assessments of the prose poem tend to be scarce and the authors often disagree upon the shape of the canon, precisely when it started, what its trajectory was, and where the genre – if that is what it really is – stands today. The focus also tends to be either upon the French tradition of prose poetry, or how it was adopted and employed in America during the twentieth century. Although the prose poems of Wilde and Dowson are commonly mentioned or discussed, the prose poem tradition in Britain at the *fin de siècle* has rarely been given central focus. The two most significant studies of the prose poem genre are Margueritte S. Murphy's *A Tradition of Subversion: The Prose Poem in English from Wilde to Ashbery* (1992) and N. Santilli's *Such Rare Citings: The Prose Poem in English* (2002). These two studies disagree on the origins of the genre, the role of Wilde and

its subsequent future, but both are important in offering definitions of this loose, complex form, so seemingly at odds with itself, often as baffling to its practitioners as its readers that it hardly seems likely to exist at all. As Murphy notes: ‘The genre, the prose poem, was a genre formed in violation of genre, a seeming hybrid, in name a contradiction in terms’ (Murphy 1992: 1). Santilli, regarding the formal structure and appearance of the prose poem, has noted: ‘The visual dimension of the prose poem is characterized by its brevity. The formal severity instantly distinguishes the form from poetic prose, which, by contrast, is naturally expansive in its complex weaving of syntactical rhythm’ (Santilli 2002: 98). So what we have is a genre wonderfully open to endless possibility and suggestion; a formless form which allows the potential for lyricism without all the constraining accoutrements of rhyme and strict metre and all the discursive fluidity of prose, its ability to absorb and contain many different dialogic and monologic discourses, with all the immediacy and brevity of a short lyric. Its shortness is the key to its status and its potential power. What proved so attractive to writers at the close of the nineteenth century was the boundless possibilities which the new genre offered, its multitude of different voices, tones and idioms, and, moreover, its ability to subvert. This ‘violation’ of genres was a political act, a breaking up of centuries of tradition and received opinion which also proved fertile soil for writing about ‘violation’ of one kind or another. It promoted subversion, be it artistic, social, or sexual. The prose poem not only suggested the violation of boundaries, it almost required it.

When charting the emergence of the prose poem in the nineteenth century, the traditional point of origin is Charles Baudelaire’s *Petits Poèmes en Prose* (1867). At the time of writing his ‘translations’ of verse in prose, Baudelaire had been re-reading Aloysius Bertrand’s *Gaspard de la Nuit* (1831) and translating the *Suspiria de Profundis* (1845) of Thomas De Quincey. Both of these texts had provided him with the desire for a particular form which coupled the lyric intensity of poetry with the flexible, direct, yet flowing mode of prosaic speech, seemingly improvised, off-the-cuff: ‘Which of us has never imagined, in his more ambitious moments, the miracle of a poetic prose, musical though rhythmless and rhymeless, flexible yet strong enough to identify with the lyrical impulses of the soul, the ebbs and flows of reverie [sic], the pangs of conscience?’ (Baudelaire 2004: 25). What Baudelaire produced with this new hybrid were fifty short pieces which vary widely in tone and content. Many of them deal with fantasies, of the relation between the artist’s conception of

the ideal and the often harsh realities of urban dwelling. They become the perfect mode for charting, exploring and describing the modern city in flux: its high life and low realities, its pleasures and its – until now – unspeakable cruelties. What these works as a whole produce is the sense of an overriding persona, or sensibility, shot through with almost Byronic irony, and with a very keen though undidactic morality.

In Britain at around this time, poetic prose was very much the vogue. But the debate about the formal relation of poetry to prose had begun to intensify. It was to be Pater himself, in his essay ‘On Style’ in *Appreciations* (1889), who would argue for a new kind of prose, because ‘those who have dwelt most emphatically on the distinction between prose and verse, prose and poetry, may sometimes have been tempted to limit the proper functions of prose too narrowly’ (Pater 1913: 5). Pater, the man who valued prose over poetry because he saw it as more difficult to write, composed a poetic prose in this essay which placed the aesthetic experience of the text over its power of discourse:

The line between fact and something quite different from external fact is, indeed, hard to draw. In Pascal, for instance, in the persuasive writers generally, how difficult to define the point where, from time to time, argument which, if it is to be worth anything at all, must consist of facts or groups of facts, becomes a pleading – a theorem no longer, but essentially an appeal to the reader to catch the writer’s spirit, to think with him, if one can or will – an expression no longer of fact but of his sense of it, his peculiar intuition of a world, prospective, or discerned below the faulty conditions of the present, in either case changed somewhat from the actual world.

(Pater 1913: 8-9)

The line here between sense and lyricism for its own sake, between facts and a sense of the writer’s spirit, is hard to trace. The music of the rolling, rhythmic clauses would be what stuck in the ears of Vernon Lee and Oscar Wilde. But what such passages as this point to, while not being prose poems per se, is the possibility for prose to take on many of the rhetorical qualities of poetry while keeping the fluidity, the freedom of prose; if not the rhythms of natural speech, then something much more cultivated, rarefied, refined.

The prose poem proper in English began to emerge at the end of the 1880s, the dawn of the nineties. The most significant starting point was Stuart Merrill’s translations of French prose poems *Pastels in Prose* (1890). This introduced many to

the voice of Baudelaire and such new and vague practitioners as Judith Gautier, Mallarmé and Paul Masy. W. D. Howells, the author of the book's introduction, praises the prose poem as a 'peculiarly modern invention' in that none of the writers 'abused his opportunity to saddle his reader with a moral' (Howells 1890: vii). This is perhaps a rather reductive assessment of the texts, but what the work did was to put the prose poem as a distinctive genre on the literary map.

The next most significant prose poetry collection is Olive Schreiner's *Dreams* (1890). These texts have had a critical revival in the last few decades in relation to their status as feminist, colonial and political texts, and relatively little has been said about their debt – as well as contribution – to the prose poem genre, and yet they are, as Margaret Stetz claims, 'allegorical poems in prose' (Stetz 2006: 621). Although they do have a very strong moral and political agenda, their engagement with form, with brevity, concision, allegory, strong symbolic imagery and Biblical syntax all go towards strengthening the particular strand of argument in hand. Far from being a mere aesthete's curio, a curate's egg, the prose poem genre is shaped and transformed in Schreiner's hands into a powerful tool for sexual and social protest. Many of the pieces appeared in Oscar Wilde's *The Woman's World*, *The Fortnightly Review* and other noted journals in the late eighties. When they were published they received a huge popular readership. Another notable collection by a woman writer is Nora Hopper's *Ballads in Prose* (1894). Margaret Stetz has recently written a lucid and revealing essay on this collection and the relation of women to the prose poem form (Stetz 2006: 619-31). As an Irish descendant, though English herself, Hopper engaged in the Celtic Twilight tradition by retelling Irish myths and legends in a series of short prose pieces, inter-cut with traditionally ordered stanzaic poems. This use of the two genres was new and daring. The prose itself, though not thoroughly lyrical, captures the music of the Irish idiom, and the winding narrative of the ballad form. Again, this would more than likely have been further influence and impetus to Bradley and Cooper in the composition of their collection.

The most famous prose poems of the decade were published by Oscar Wilde on 1 July 1894 in *The Fortnightly Review* (in Wilde 1998: 253-63). These pieces are remarkable for their apparently strong Christian morality, their craft and their use of the idiom of the Old Testament. It was, ironically, the problematic blending of prose and poetry which would figure prominently in Wilde's downfall in his 1895 trial. The claim that a love letter to Lord Alfred Douglas was actually nothing more than 'a



prose poem [which] will shortly be published in sonnet form in a delightful magazine' (Wilde in Holland 2004: 53-4), did very little to alleviate suspicion surrounding his sexuality, and only served to fuel it as regarded the already confusing, subversive nature of the prose poem as a literary entity. It very quickly became associated with vice, corruption and the violation of acceptable boundaries. A form which had begun to be so liberating for women writers such as Schreiner, Hopper, and in private, Michael Field, was suddenly outlawed: 'scandal and homophobia, "patriotism" and Francophobia, combined lethally to stigmatize a form that had barely emerged' (Murphy 1992: 33). At the close of the 90s Dowson would publish a small number of prose poems in *Decorations* (1899), but this would effectively be the end of the genre in Britain until well into the twentieth century.

This is the literary and cultural backdrop to Michael Field's composition of 'For That Moment Only', showing the influences and diverse strands of thought and aesthetics within the genre, as well as the possible reason why the project was never published. Michael Field's collection in its final form constitutes an important contribution not only to the genre in the nineteenth century, but the role of the woman writer within that new tradition, dealing with questions of aesthetics, sexuality, gender and social concerns. A work which takes its name from Pater's 'Conclusion' to *The Renaissance*,<sup>52</sup> that elemental hymn to momentary sensation, also manages to look beyond the pleasures of the moment, both into the past, but also into the future.

The two series of 'For That Moment Only' do not appear to follow any apparent or overriding narrative structure; the pieces are individual visions, single and singular moments of aesthetic, emotional and intellectual connection with a particular thought or theme. What seems to distinguish the two series is that the first deals with more classical, pagan tropes while the second is more contemporary. What I want to do in this chapter is dwell less on the distinction between the two halves, and more on how the whole collection deals with pagan spirituality, the classical past, desire for the masculine and the feminine, and more contemporary social issues such as gender. Bradley and Cooper referred to these pieces as *croquis* or sketches, and I will follow this practice, although they fully qualify as prose poems.

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<sup>52</sup> 'Every moment some form grows perfect in hand or face; some tone on the hills or the sea is choicer than the rest; some mood of passion or insight or intellectual excitement is irresistibly real and attractive to us, – for that moment only' (Pater 1980: 188). When re-reading this passage, Cooper said that the last line: 'is a deep red rose-bud, literally officious in its fragrance.' It conjured up the 'gleams, flashes, + fine flowers, lanterns, + light, + rays, + the gamut of time' which both women felt their prose 'impressions' evoked. (Field, Michael, BL. Add. MS. 46782, 1894, fol. 130v).

The opening sketch is entitled ‘A Vision or a Waking Dream?’, immediately invoking the close of Keats’s ‘Ode to a Nightingale’, pre-empting Michael Field’s contemplation of the liminal connection between dreams and reality, art and life, the harsh present and the sublime serenity of the classical past. The piece opens with the speaker describing a landscape: ‘I looked down a vista of olive trees, white and grey and blue as silver: the branches were cramped into the form of a roof, above ground half dust and half pebbles. The morning was brilliant in the world, a fresh April morning; but in the olive vista shadow still held its own’ (*fol.* 3).<sup>53</sup> This summer scene, with the olives ripening in the sun, is actually split into two, and it is the roof of olive trees which holds the two spheres apart. Above is the sun, a world of vibrant colours and clarity, but below, amidst the dust and pebbles of the ground is a shadow land, a seemingly mystic space where ‘thirty little creatures’ are soon visible dancing together:

Their skins were brown, such brown as has in it a rich syrup-  
warmth: their little shanks shone demurely with fun, too young to  
be brown like the rest of their bodies, but visible as a sleekness  
with honied flush on it lying one way from the hips to the rugged  
hoofs. I did not see faces I could describe: only in the dance I  
caught now and then the glimpse of a mouth with a smile running  
up into the cheeks, and lost there as wonderfully as a rillet in sand;  
on eyes that slanted and spilt a bubble of laughter; on a chin with  
mischief round its globe; where the fur was slight as a peach’s.  
(*fols.* 3-4)

It is clear that whoever is dancing within the shade – be they real or a figment of the speaker’s heat-affected mind – they are not entirely human. This paragraph, forming the centre of the sketch, consists of only two sentences, each composed of clause upon rhythmic clause, echoing the cadences of Pater, but using this music not for the sake of linguistic music but to enhance the ambience, the *jouissant* atmosphere of the dance which is being described. Further poetic techniques such as sibilance – ‘skins’; ‘syrup’; ‘shanks’; ‘shone’; ‘sleekness’ – further enhance the poeticism of the piece, announcing its status as something freer than the poem, but more concentrated than mere poetic prose. At the same time it provides the background music, the soft, insistent hush, the continual movement and music of the olive leaves in the trees

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<sup>53</sup> This manuscript document is held in the Bodleian Library and catalogued as MS.ENG.MISC.d.976. All further references to it in this chapter will be made by folio number.

above the dancers. Whoever they are, fauns, maenads, dryads, this is the constant background anthem of their lives and their pleasures. The semantic field of richness – ‘syrup’, ‘honied’, ‘flush’, ‘globe’, ‘peach’s’ – serves further to emphasise the feeling of youth which the prose poem implies, filling out the sensuous nature of the dance which takes place under cover, in thick shade.

The piece closes swiftly after this encounter with the strange forms in the shadows, as the narrator seemingly rouses, moving away from the scene to more sober reality, but with no answers as to what the figures were, only one thing is clear: ‘Whatever one might call them they belonged to Bacchus, they belonged to April and to adolescence’ (*fol.* 5). The narrator was, in fact, talking about the olives all along. The tone has changed away from the heady poeticism of the middle paragraph to shorter paragraphs of one sentence; the world of the prosaic has returned. What may appear to be a rather comical piece about fauns dancing in the shade is a keenly felt hymn to sensuous pleasure in the natural world, and in the strength and beauties of youth. The faun is commonly used in Michael Field’s work as a trope for powerful, playful and subversive energies: part animal, part female and part child. (It should also be remembered that it was the nickname which Bradley and Cooper had for Bernard Berenson). This piece displays the deft control over form, the ability to change idiom and vocabulary, to play the poetic and the prosaic against each other to evoke specific effects to a high degree of accomplishment. What results is a world vision where the present and the classical world lie one atop the other, each overlapping, as the past is seen just below the counterpane of the present.

This theme of the classical pagan past pervading the present, of the narrator’s capability to see it, is present in many of the sketches in the first series, but in no more astonishing form than in the haunting piece ‘An Agony’:

The evening sky was colourless and the wheat one ardour of green in face of it: the world was too austere to be sad – we could only feel its sadness as tranquillity, as dew about the farms.

A tremulous, visionary passion rose in me as I wandered on: and then, as if in response to it, I found I was suddenly not alone as I had thought; for a young man, close to the path, supported himself across the branches of a maple, his arms hanging straight down from the armpits to the ends of the fingers. His naked limbs were long as a boy’s, yet soft in their modelling as a woman’s, dark-golden by nature, but reddened with sunburn. His hair was ruddier still by several shades than his chest, and a strange crown of Oriental design covered it like a bower – the rays of the crown

being vine-stems: and their leaf buds stood out at such intervals as are normally left between jewels in a setting. Loops of vine-sprays and vine-buds fell from his neck to the waist, and at his loins a clump of boughs spread out into open leafage.

His head was bent, his mouth in shadow: underneath the tiara his dun brow stretched wide, with fretted eyebrows and eyelids that kept me quiet by their quietness. Then I saw that large drops, white, limpid, patient, came through the lids and hung unfallen.

I knew I was in the presence of Bacchus: I knew it by his garlands, his budding crown, by the ease of his limbs – and he, the Vine, was weeping.

In the top of the maple tree, over which he hung, a pruning-knife was hitched.

Then I understood, as far as confused passion can, the God was weeping at some hurt that had wounded to the quick, that he must bear in loneliness for the sake of the vintage, and of the men who should drink it, though they had ignored him.

Twilight grew over the vineyard: something was shaken down, glittering as it fell, was scattered and lost in the soil – a tear.

I looked with relief at the quiet lids: another tear was oozing and was almost round.

Then I moved sharply away – forever.

*(fols. 9-12)*

This sketch, presented here in its entirety, has all the tactile colour and precise composition, all the physical and emotional intensity of a Grand Master oil painting. Amidst the austere nature scene, the speaker wanders amongst the wheat fields and lanes and happens upon the body of a young man, the god Bacchus, hanging across a maple tree, half supported, half crucified in an attitude of acute pain. The figure, though male, is androgynous: ‘His naked limbs were long as a boy’s, yet soft in their modelling as a woman’s’. Although there to heighten the plight of the forgotten gods which linger in the fields and the mountains, as well as the suffering of the vines born to be cut down and turned into wine, he is also there for the viewer’s visual pleasure: the second paragraph guides the reader’s eyes down from his outstretched arms, over his reddened skin, down to his loins, crowded with boughs of vine. His plight only serves as a context, much like the vogue for artworks of Christ’s crucifixion, for a young man to be portrayed, semi-naked, in a pose ostensibly painful, yet with all the posture of physical gratification. The description of his tears in paragraph three, the viscous sap of the vines, has a distinctly sexual undertone: ‘I saw that large drops, white, limpid, patient, came through the lids and hung unfallen.’ The focus then moves swiftly away from a physical description of the prostrate youth to a

consideration of his status as Bacchus, the god of the vines cut to the quick by the pruning knife. The sudden understanding of his suffering in paragraph six is that the once lauded god must now suffer the indifference of men, as well as the actual pain inflicted upon the body of the vines. This evokes similar ecological sentiments which Gerard Manley Hopkins explores in 'Binsey Poplars': 'O if we but knew what we do / When we delve or hew – / Hack and rack the growing green! [...] even where we mean / To mend her we end her' (Hopkins 1967: 78-79, 10-12 & 17-18). Nature must bear the pain of Mankind's desires, as literally embodied here by the presence of the weeping Bacchus. The speaker moves away at the end through guilt at his/her inability to alleviate this suffering, and aware of his or her own part in it. Despite the pain inflicted by indifference and ingratitude, Bacchus will bear these agonies for the sake of the vine, for the sake of Man. Although ostensibly pagan, the Christian parallels are very plain. This intense, erotic and lush vision of the fallen pagan world is a lament for the fading of faith in general, of the lost ability to see the sublime and the spiritual in the world, and the lack of appreciation for the sacred bond between mankind and nature. This haunting work shows the deft visual precision with which Michael Field can paint with ability and flair in prose, and also the faint strain of the erotic which threads through their many tableaux of the male and female forms.

This focus upon the classical past as a continuing source of viable spiritual worship is continued in subsequent sketches, reaching a state which borders upon epiphany in 'A Maenad'. Here, the female narrator, along with two other women, is enjoying an afternoon in the Surrey wealds: 'It was April, an April without showers, with grey, inoperative clouds floating over the sunshine from time to time, making the air cold as they paused, but never withdrawing all the light out of the landscape' (*fol.* 13). This opening contains an echo of Chaucer's 'General Prologue' to *The Canterbury Tales*: 'Whan that Aprill with his shoures soote / The droghte of March hath perced to the roote' (Chaucer 1987: 23, 1-2), but here, no sweet showers bathe the earth. The landscape which these three pilgrims inhabit has the cooling threat of impending rain, all of its attendant sun-stealing drabness, but none of the refreshing, replenishing qualities of the actual event. A further echo is from one of Michael Field's own poems, already cited in Chapter Four: 'It was deep April, and the morn / Shakespeare was born' (*UTBa*: 79, 1-2). In 'A Maenad', the three women, against the indifferent face of nature, and away from the intrusive eyes of men, are able to enjoy complete freedom in each other's company, against the world, away from the prying

gaze of outsiders. The youngest woman of the group is singled out for special attention by the narrator, being the physical embodiment of health and youth, and something much more, the Golden Age: ‘We were vibrant and impetuous as the forces that splendidly and naively were coming once more into existence round us. The imperishable truth of the Bacchic legend was re-incarnated in us all, but took the most perfect form in the youngest of our party – a girl scarcely out of her teens. [...] The dusky oval of her face was crossed by black brows, lovely in utter blackness, and in their union over the nose like a Greek’s’ (*fol.* 14). The narrator, enchanted by the appearance of the girl, asks her to dance. She then proceeds to launch into a wild, primitive dance which, below all the ridiculousness caused by the juxtaposition with her more restrained Victorian clothing, betrays the liberating, threatening energy of the maenad:

She wore a black skirt and little black velvet jacket, over a bodice of shamrock green and a great black hat, with cloudy ostrich-plumes, swung behind her like a warrior’s shield. I had admired her all morning: suddenly I asked her to dance.

She sprang to the summons, hitched up her skirt ’round her black pantaloons, pulled off her shoes, and in her black stockings began to dance a hornpipe on the grass. I watched in an ecstasy of delight her lovely feet and ankles, her black girt shape with the green sleeves and green wreath, her liberated face following in expression the liberty of her feet as they hopped and spun and kicked and scarcely touched the ground. She sprang high, then fell on her toes that carried her forward of their own motion; her arms bent themselves over her head or swung out toward the veiled horizon of Surrey-wealds: and there was nothing against her arms and head and shoulders but the sky – one instance a monotone of cloud, the next a sheet of sunlight.

(*fol.* 15)

This is the ultimate dance of ‘*L’Indifférent*’. But here, unlike in the poem on Watteau’s painting (*SS*: 1-2), the dancer dances not only for the pleasure of the self, but for her admiring female audience. If the dancer qualifies as a New Woman, she is also something potentially more. The maenads themselves, carrying destruction and violence in their wake, were certainly not the victims of any patriarchal order. Indeed, Yopie Prins states of the maenad, or literally ‘mad ones’ that ‘Breaking out of the domestic sphere, the maenad crossed the boundary into a domain culturally coded as “natural” and “savage”’ (Prins 1999b: 49). In this case, the power of the maenad, outside of domesticity, in the boundless free space of the prose poem, remains more

of a latent threat, but one with more than a hint of almost ungovernable savage potential. In the following paragraph the women are disturbed by the passing of two male walkers. The dancer flies into the cover of the trees, leaving the narrator furious at this invasion: 'How we longed to tear them to pieces' (*fol.* 16). Any possibility of violence remains safely beneath the surface. Following the departure of the men, the dancer re-appears for an encore, before all three of them depart for the train where the narrator closes: 'I grant she did all this: yet I had seen as pure a Maenad as ever danced over Cithaeron. The far days of Greece had been today with us, among the box-groves on a Surrey down' (*fol.* 17). What 'A Maenad' as a whole exhibits is the deep affiliation with the Classical past as displayed in the previous prose poems, but in a modern setting. The prose poem form becomes the perfect space for the subversive crossing of boundaries between the past and present, and between hetero and homosexual desire.

Moreover, it is the recurring trope of dancing here which symbolises all that is so primal below the surface appearance of the young ladies. Dancing in past poetry collections has been an emblem of self-containment and aesthetic indifference. It was also an important aspect of Bradley and Cooper's lives, as they wrote upon reading Augusta Webster's review of *Underneath the Bough* on 10 September 1893: 'We read, rejoice, dance madly, pluck the oak-apples'.<sup>54</sup> In 'A Maenad' it is a more formless and potentially destabilising activity. It matches what Arthur Symons hailed as the dance's true qualities: 'The dance is life, animal life, having its own way passionately. Part of the natural madness which men were once wise enough to include in religion' (Symons 1910: 387). The 'natural madness' which Michael Field's young maiden/maenad exhibits is connected to the boundless, free-style verbal dance of the prose-poem: neither a formal dance or formal lyric poetics could contain the wordless strength of her actions. The trope of dancing will recur throughout the poetic oeuvre in the future, and always with this latent sense of primal energy, of potential power and threat beneath its beautiful, aesthetic surface.

That this aesthetic of the past becomes manifest within a contemporary person, an object of the narrator's desire, is evident in 'A Faun'. Here, however, the focus of desire is a young man as opposed to a young woman, retaining the balance of attention between the sexes as objects of desire as seen in previous collections of lyric

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<sup>54</sup> Field, Michael, BL. Add. MS. 46781, 1893, *fol.* 66r

poetry. This work describes a group of tourists in Italy, taking a break in the afternoon amid the ruins of a Villa when the sun is at its most fierce. The prose poem opens quite formally, descriptively but not with the least hint of lyricism. At points it feels more like a brief travel sketch, a piece of mere reportage; that is until the focus turns to the period of the siesta and the eyes of the narrator hone in on the figure of a young man who has been travelling with the party, who in turn is described in sensuous detail as he dozes in the shade:

Among us was a young man with strange irregular features: we had often told him he was like a faun; even his character had on one side, the incalculable sincerity, the *aplomb*, the freshness and malice of a wood-god. Now it chanced, as I lent forward listening to the conversation of a scholar of uncertain age, that I caught sight of this young man asleep. He lay with his knees up and his hands behind his head, which was thrown back into the herbage with a fierce exhaustion that would have its fill of rest. His short locks were dark and damp on his forehead. The nose, though rather wide, had a finely sentient look about it; the jaw had the satyr's squareness. His eyebrows were wonderful in ripple, only the wave lines left on sand will give an idea of their inevitable and naïve beauty – a silver light haunted them. The sunshine was a white enamel on his temples, his cheeks were ruddy hot and his mouth thrust its lips clear out of the beard – lips coloured as if with freshest pigment and simple in their insolence.

(fols. 36-8)

Amidst the distracting, ephemeral chatter of the scholar in the present moment, the narrator, of indefinite gender, looks at the features and posture of the young man in perfectly undisturbed sleep and is transposed away from the present moment into a reverie where the young man is seen as a 'satyr', the embodiment of a faun. The young man's posture 'with his knees up and his hands behind his head [...] thrown back into the hedge with a fierce exhaustion' is reminiscent of the figure of Mars following his encounter with Venus in Botticelli's painting (SS: 42-7). The narrator dwells on each feature of the face, moving from the hair on his forehead down to the lips, visible through the beard – the feminine just below the surface of the masculine – just as the man himself is sunk amidst the undergrowth and the past is embedded within the present. It is as though the spirit of the location, the *genius loci*, has claimed him, and through him, momentarily, the narrator has the ability to see and sense the past made flesh, to glimpse the inner character of the young man – brash, energetic, yet innately sensual – as it really is. As the young man awakes, the tone



again reverts to the manner of travel reportage, but notes of the man: ‘He was now a young man, very much of today, who talked to the people he knew’ (*fol.* 40). The spell has been irrevocably broken, and the narrator and the young man are to remain the poorer for that as the final line proclaims: ‘O Poor Faun, Poor Faun, Poor Faun!’ (*fol.* 41). The narrator has returned from the blissful moment of lyrical connection to the more enduring prosaic present. On a biographical level, this text dates from 1893, a time when Bradley and Cooper holidayed with Berenson and his circle. The poem could be seen as being by Cooper, expressing the extent – but also the boundaries – of her intellectualised passion for him. However, within the context of the collection, the status of the narrator’s gender is impossible to define, even if the ‘male’ authorship of Michael Field is discounted by any possible reader. So, as with ‘A Maenad’, ‘A Faun’ is a potentially subversive expression of same-sex desire. Taking this into consideration, with the fact that the prose poem genre became associated with such transgressions and ambiguities in 1895, ‘For That Moment Only’ begins to appear as a potentially incendiary document. In this light, it is not hard to discern a reason as to why Bradley and Cooper chose to keep it to themselves.

As mentioned before, the poems of the second series move away from close encounters with the classical past but retain a sense of the pagan energy and affinity with nature. There is also at times a more experimental lyricism, almost a mysticism which comes into focus, emerging in the quite phenomenal ‘A Face Seen in Ling’:

I am crossing a moor in declining sunlight. The vaporous western horizon breaks into a dazzling feather-light of *cirri*, over a rift of sudden acute blue, between toneless stretches of rain-cloud. I look till my eyes ache, and then, turning eastward, discern a few steps off to my left, on a higher slope, a woman lying full length in the ling, as rigid and uncompromising as if she were dead, profile outlined in white against the sky. Her soft hair is blown over her gray cap; the harsh ridges of a heath-coloured mackintosh cover her form up to the chin. Her face alone is exposed and lies deep in the ling, so that one little spray in its rebound, pushes toward the exquisite lobes of her ear.

Full of all darkness that is not black, the indigo [broses?] of the undergrowth press up suddenly against the wash of pale hair over the forehead, while the delicate sprinkling of silver flowers on their surface subdues and carries into infinite distance the tawny background, moulding the cheek – a cheek of pure pallor and imperfect youth.

There is nothing in the sky so beautiful as that smooth face  
laid clear to the light, and I remain with my back to the west till  
sundown.

(*fols.* 48-9)

The narrator addresses the audience in the first person, in the present tense, as though the scene described is immediately unfolding. The narrator, crossing the moors in the sunset, discovers a young woman lying in the heather. Whether she is alive or dead, asleep or unconscious for any specific reason is not made clear. The imagery is direct, sparse and intense, picking out the details of the thick heather and using it to throw into high relief the woman's hair and the 'pure pallor' of her youthful face. In the single sentence of the final paragraph the narrator moves away from the sky, finding no beauty there to compare with that which lies in the heather.

The piece is extraordinary, with no elucidation as to what it could mean, where the narrator has come from, or what she/he intends to do after they have finished looking. It rests as a work of pure aestheticism, of the discovery of an unexpected, imperfect yet enchanting beauty, made all the more so by the strangeness of the encounter. This is a homely Venus asleep in the heather; not in her unguarded nakedness – and not in furs – but in a mackintosh and a cap. The subtle blending of atmosphere, somewhere between ecstasy and the macabre – the woman could, after all be, dead – is both astonishingly beautiful, evocative and unsettling, and totally without precedent in the rest of the collection. All extraneous matter has been removed, there is no prosaic preamble or explanatory postscript, just the puzzling, pared-down lyricism of the immediate moment, the beguiling mystery of beauty encountered though untouched, writ-large. This piece exhibits the more intensely imagistic qualities associated with the poetic, making it easier to identify it as a prose poem proper.

There is an interesting parallel between this work and another prose poem which was not written until almost a century later in the 1980s by the Irish writer Samuel Beckett. The subject matter of Beckett's 'One Evening' and Michael Field's 'A Face Seen in Ling', a body found in a field at twilight while a person is out wandering, is almost exactly the same:

He was found lying on the ground. No one had missed him. No one was looking for him. An old woman found him. To put it vaguely. It happened so long ago. She was straying in search of

wild flowers. Yellow only. With no eyes but for these she stumbled on him lying there. He lay face downward and arms outspread. He wore a greatcoat in spite of the time of year. Hidden by the body a long row of buttons fastened it all the way down. Buttons of all shapes and sizes. Worn upright the skirts swept the ground. That seems to hang together. Near the head a hat lay askew on the ground. At once on its brim and crown. He lay inconspicuous in the greenish coat. To catch an eye searching from afar there was only the white head. May she have seen him somewhere before? Somewhere on his feet before? Not too fast. She was all in black. The hem of her long black skirt trailed in the grass. It was close of day.

(Beckett 1995: 253)

One main difference is the gender of the body: in Beckett's piece the figure is male, the person who finds him is definitely female, but the coat, the sunset, the presence of flowers around the corpse and the mention of the west (not quoted here) are exactly the same. Another main difference lies within the narrative styles: Beckett's text is concerned with the post-modern agony over narrative form – the text continually slows itself down, speeds up and chooses to question and omit certain pieces of information. Michael Field's prose poem is more at home with its narrative form, though being nonetheless innovative by making the action, or at least the retelling of the action, in the immediate present. It is almost inconceivable that Beckett would have seen or known about this small work when he composed 'One Evening', yet a comparison between the two is valuable and revealing. While not as technically self-conscious as Beckett's work, it is perhaps all the stronger for this, foregrounding the deftly accumulated sense of atmosphere, placing the contemplation of beauty centre stage; while the narrator and what she/he sees remains vital it is not the central concern of the work. Michael Field's prose poetry was certainly pointing straight towards future possibilities for the genre which it fell to others to fulfil.

'A Face Seen in Ling' and its satellite pieces – 'Darkened Eyes' and 'By the Sundial' (*fol.* 50-1) – exhibit a move to a more intense and imagistic lyricism than some of the more discursive, lingering pieces. Yet this is a lyricism which relies less on formal poetic technique and more on brevity, sharper imagery, with a sensuous use of colour and the creation of almost palpable atmospheres, as in 'Darkened Eyes':

Rose and wine-coloured blossoms, vague with a silver tissue of light, were opening on the stalks of the hollyhocks and drowning the bees; beyond them the burnt-up discs and flapping

rays of very tall sun-flowers bowed gauntly from their stems, while under the regiment of hollyhocks deep clove-carnations fell over of their own weight, and a thick square of mallows showed a whiteness as sheeny and as cooling as that of satin.

The sunshine explored and thrilled the flowers, heightening their colours as the tints of a face are heightened by emotion; the grass, still profuse from weeks of summer rain, was vaporous gold while an unsuspected lustre in the air struck dazzling as spider-webs that suddenly revealed it. Turning from the garden to the house, I was met by a young servant. 'O Ellen', I exclaimed, 'it is beautiful in the garden.'

'And, do you know ... isn't it strange' she laughed – 'the master has only just come in, and he says: things are not looking as bright as usual in the garden this morning.'

The master was an old man.

(*fols.* 43-4)

This piece is intensely visual, dwelling not only on the colours of the flowers, but their tactility, the 'silver tissue of light' which they are transformed into by the speaker's outer and inner eye. This is a small landscape 'explored and thrilled' by light and the viewer's wonder in its beauty. Each short, packed paragraph of prose here is like an intensely structured stanza of verse, with each one getting shorter and shorter towards the close, as the focus narrows from the ebullience of the youthful speaker, to the reported dissatisfaction of the old man. Ernest Dowson, in his prose poems, experimented with a prose lyricism which is akin in its brevity to some of Michael Field's sketches, but also used more formal poetic techniques, such as the refrain, to some success:

Green changed to white, emerald to an opal: nothing was changed.

The man let the water trickle gently into his glass, and as the green clouded, a mist fell away from his mind.

Then he drank opaline.

Memories and terrors beset him. The past tore after him like a panther and through the blackness of the present he saw the luminous tiger eyes of the things to be.

But he drank opaline.

(Dowson 2003: 211)

In the complete text, the phrase 'he drank opaline' occurs three times as a separate paragraph, and all the while the swirling colours of the drink and the ensuing dream-vision echo the dizzying, nauseous feeling of desperate intoxication. This is a prose text which trumpets its poetic affinities, appearing, in structure, like a stanza of free-

verse. Michael Field's prose poems do not go this far in their assimilation of poetic technique: they are successful in finding a hybrid lyricism somewhere between the prosaic and the poetic which has all the intensity of vocabulary, metaphor and vision of the short lyric, coupled with the fluidity, the natural rhythms of speech. This is a poetics un-housed for the moment from the rigours and strictures of prescribed poetic forms.

As the collection draws to a close, it moves away from lyricism for its own sake, to a consideration of more social concerns, such as the position of women in the domestic and educational spheres, as desiring objects in their own right. In the piece entitled 'Grandfather's Chair' a group of young women at a breakfast table debate the 'freedom' of women while in the company of a young male guest. It opens with a dialogue, with the group of young women discussing the methods which they use to ensure they always get their 'own way'. The focus then moves half way through to the young man, the 'cattle-hunting' colonist who is staying at the same country house, and the ways in which the women both try and fail to neutralise his dominating presence as they discuss a subject not intended for his ears:

Only one man was in the room – a young colonist, fresh from cattle-hunting in the West, with eyes like azure lakes, gold moustache and a complexion as fine and pure as his own Californian air. Alone in the presence of women, a proud bashfulness frankly lighted up his face.

'We always leave the Grandfather's chair for you' one of the girls had remarked, and he had slipped in, rosy, secure of his freedom, his eyes motionless as if resting on the verge of a prairie.

The rebels went on with their confidences that grew more and more into demands. Every girl, they said, had a right to her own home and to the natural play of her own being.

'I don't think you ought to hear all this' – one of the four addressed the young colonist. His smile grew more consciously radiant, but the clear eyes never moved in their outlook.

'We may theorise about woman's freedom' she continued 'but Mr. Hooper is thinking how different it will be when he brings a wife to that beautiful home, with the redwood floors, he is going to build out yonder. Isn't that what you are thinking?' He grew rose to the chipped roots of his hair, but did not answer or shift his glance.

So the girls went on talking heedlessly, while he sat in the grandfather's chair, immobile and brilliant as a young sphinx at dawn.

*(fols. 66-8)*

Mr. Hooper may be abashed by the presence and confidence of the young women, yet he seems comfortable in that he holds the position of real power. In the Grandfather's Chair, the throne of the house's patriarch, he sits ultimately above judgement, able through his silence, despite his blushes, to avoid being drawn into answering any questions on the subject of women's freedom. The chatter may move on and continue around him, but it is ineffectual. Nothing has been changed by this playful non-encounter of opinions. The worldly adventurer, the coloniser of land and ultimately of women, is not affected by the 'woman question' which swirls aimlessly around him, reduced as it is in this smart allegory into the childish prattle of spoilt upper-class women. At the close, he sits in triumph, with all the mysterious beauty of the powerful sphinx. It is possible to see a link between this sketch and the allegorical prose written by Olive Schreiner, such as 'Three Dreams in a Desert', where the imbalance of power relations between male and female is dramatically critiqued. And yet, it is an influence but gently felt: Michael Field's work contains none of the stark allegorical imagery of Schreiner, none of the Biblical rhythms and none of the proposed answers to female freedom. But it is an allegory nonetheless, but all the subtler for the blending of the dialogic with the lyrical, the enigmatically poetical and the short story form in miniature, one where the male and the female meet, but both are too assured in their supposed power over the other to connect properly, to change each other's views. Michael Field's past assurance from *Sight and Song* that men and women literally speak two different languages is reiterated here, but made all the more arresting by an ambiguous, subtle approach.

The final sketch, 'Cupid at College', ends the collection on a lighter note. Here, a group of women at college, presumably Newnham girls, chatter as they await the start of their class. A new girl has joined their group but stands at this moment apart from the rest, still unsure of herself and the place which she now occupies. But then, the young Professor arrives, captivating his young charges into silence and awe:

Suddenly the door opened: there was the sweep of a black gown  
and a very young professor faced both the maidens and the sun.

His black college cap threw into relief a face somewhat fair  
and now ornate; grave eyes, half cold, half bashful avoided the  
glances that met them; the mouth had that look of adolescent  
repulse to soft emotion that we imagine on the mouth of  
Hippolytus.

He passed through the maidens as quickly as a gust of bright  
wind – chill, independent of their sex, yet self-conscious.

How Venus must have laughed at this disguise of Cupid's!  
All the girl students were heart-sick.  
To the new-comer a God had filled the college .... it was the  
temple of her first love.

(*fols.* 70-1)

The new-comer is now initiated into her new status as both student and first-time lover. If there was any doubt raised in 'Grandfather's Chair' as to Michael Field's opinion of the social status of women, then 'Cupid at College' goes some way to setting the record straight: these women are freed from the drawing-room, receiving the same manner of education as their male peers, and enjoying the privilege of that freedom to love and desire freely. Again, just for that moment, only Cupid, below the surface of the modern young man's beauty, piques and captivates his charges. His appearance awakens the sexuality of these young women as he awakens them to knowledge. The presence of Cupid, of the Classical past returned is, in the eye of the beholder like that of the genre of the sketch, the prose poem itself: continually shifting, diaphanous, only present to those who happen to see and wish to be liberated.

The liberation of the female students is a perfect ending to a collection of prose sketches which plays continually with the freedoms offered when the prosaic and the poetic collide and are combined. Brevity, concision of image and metaphor as well as a variety of voices and idioms can all be used to unique poetic effect with a genre so free of boundaries, a form so without form, that it can be adapted to almost any thematic purpose. In Michael Field's hands 'For That Moment Only' becomes a valuable contribution to the evolving, uncertain genre of the prose poem at the *fin de siècle*. The fact that it did not appear in print hints at the devastating cultural legacy of the Wilde trials and the almost palpable anxiety which may have stalked many writers who wished to probe the boundaries of social and sexual conventions, as well as the accepted frameworks of genre. As Margaret Stetz has stated: 'As the century closed, women writers were, in a sense, returned to the house, after their brief wanderings in the lawless zone between poetry and prose' (Stetz 2006: 628).

It is possible that in the end Bradley and Cooper simply felt their old anxieties about a mode of writing which they felt was at odds with their poetic calling, as a remark by Cooper in the journals in 1894, when the sketches were still being written, attests: 'It gives us such a solid feeling, when we have finished a poetic drama – this

sense that we have wrought literature. With prose work it is as yet quite different.’<sup>55</sup> But the maturity and variety of styles evident in ‘For That Moment Only’ – and the fact that the work remained lovingly preserved in manuscript – hints at a continued affection for this work. As a whole, it exhibits a playful wit and clarity in narrative voice and vision which surely rivals the celebrated prose poem collections of Schreiner and Wilde, even sometimes eclipsing their Biblical overtones with a less clamorous and more flexible diction. Had it appeared, it would have perhaps put Michael Field at the very forefront of the avant-garde, and would quite possibly have compromised ‘his’ reputation even more, perhaps irreparably, through the association with a new elusive genre that had received such negative publicity. Even in its isolation, what this work does is to show the experiments of form which were occurring at this stage, how the aesthetic essay, the short story, and many other genres were colliding and melding, forming the patterns for the Modernist short story, for new ways of communicating subjectivity, for the concept of epiphany. The partition walls between genres in the aesthetic lumber-room, were, after all, made of very thin plaster.

‘For That Moment Only’ looks continually to the past, not only the classical past, but the past poetic oeuvre of Michael Field: the concerns with gender relations, the painterly aesthetic, and the focus upon the body all resurface in this radicalised form. These themes will remain in the more formal poetry of the future, but allied with these will be a pagan energy, not entirely severed from Christianity even at this time, but which will lead to a more spiritualised world view. What this collection constitutes is a valuable addition to the genre of the prose poem where it is not seen as a means of merely describing the immediacy of experience in the metropolis, the wanderings of the solitary muser. Like other female writers such as Schreiner and Hopper, Michael Field uses the form to probe the mystical, historic, transcendent qualities of the domestic and the everyday. These prose poems bridge the period between 1893-5 when the Michael Field collaboration was at its most strained: they managed a continuation of a poetic discussion in a loose, un-restraining medium which would be resumed, if not as fully as before, then apparently so, for the remainder of Bradley and Cooper’s career. ‘For That Moment Only’, in my opinion,

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<sup>55</sup> Field, Michael, BL. Add. MS. 46782, 1894, *fol.* 57r



rests as one of the most important poetic collections of Michael Field even if it never saw the light.

## **Chapter 6. ‘Ancient Law of Pleasure’: from Profane to Sacred in *Wild Honey from Various Thyme* (1908)**

It was a long road which Michael Field travelled from the publication of the first edition of *Underneath the Bough* in 1893 and the abandoned experimentalism of ‘For That Moment Only’ in the mid 90s to the issuing of the majestic, idiosyncratic collection *Wild Honey from Various Thyme* in 1908. In this time, as well as two revisions of the *Bough* and the drafted prose poems Bradley and Cooper composed and published nine verse dramas.<sup>56</sup> Also, throughout the nineties, Bradley and Cooper had continued to compose lyric poetry, both individually and collaboratively, as the size of the book – some one hundred and ninety-four pages – attests. *Wild Honey* is, effectively, an anthology of their nineties work placed alongside the more recent verse of the new century. It is a major event in the Michael Field oeuvre: not only does it mark the re-emergence of a seemingly unified lyric voice which is richer, more complex and formally assured than ever, it also dramatises the conversion from pagan to Catholic allegiances which would have such major implications for the future emotional, spiritual and aesthetic directions of Bradley, Cooper and, indeed, Michael Field.

The long gestation period of *Wild Honey* may have spanned the years of Bradley and Cooper’s most ardent paganism and their movement towards Christianity, but it also marked the shifting and realignment of more terrestrial allegiances which would have no lesser a role to play in Michael Field’s career. As the influence of Bernard Berenson began to wane, a more benign and sympathetic male presence entered the scene. Early in 1894 Bradley and Cooper were introduced to the two young painters Charles Ricketts and Charles Shannon. As artists and companions, there was an immediate feeling of empathy between the two couples. After Ricketts and Shannon’s first visit in 1894, Cooper wrote:

Finally we bid our guest[s] goodbye with a sense we have walked  
into friendship as deep as moving grass. [...] These two men live

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<sup>56</sup> These plays were: *Attila*, *My Attila* (1896), *Fair Rosamund* (1897 reissue), *The World at Auction* (1898), *Anna Ruina* (1899), *Noontide Branches* (1899), *The Race of Leaves* (1901), *Julia Domna* (1903), *Borgia* (1905), and *Queen Mariamne* (1908). The last two plays were published anonymously on the advice of Charles Ricketts. This perhaps helped gain some of the positive attention they received. However, despite this, there was seemingly no question of doing the same for the lyric poetry.

+ work together or find rest + joy in each other's love just as we  
do – two men whose life is complete harmony + two women – no  
wonder the male + female dual number is sympathetic.<sup>57</sup>

They felt they had met their counterparts – almost a mirror image of their romantic and artistic partnership – in the male sex. In the end, it was to be Ricketts who proved to be the more helpful and influential of the two painters. His Vale Press would publish four of their plays,<sup>58</sup> and he would be called upon to design a number of their later editions of poetry, most importantly, the front cover to *Wild Honey*, *Poems of Adoration* (1912) and *Mystic Trees* (1913). Although based upon a shared love of the arts, the relationship with Ricketts could be robustly critical, but it was criticism with a purpose and often seasoned with intimate, wry humour: ‘you have a tendency at times to use “art” words, or shall we say “slow” words, when the quick common words would be better, more nimble and more intense’ (Ricketts 1981: 9). He was to have a central role in the publication and reception of *Wild Honey* as the designer of the now famous front cover of silken green, patterned with golden honey-combs and bees. On 17 September 1907 Bradley wrote to him requesting his services as designer: ‘Seriously, dear Painter, draw me your wildest bees, in swarm, or settling on St John, or in stormy wrangle with locusts, or meditating with deliberate feet the camel hair. O draw me the dear dead bumblebee – eternal among the years – that you gave me in another century than this’ (Bradley in Ricketts 1981: 25). Shortly after, he replied with characteristic faux-annoyance and self-deprecation: ‘Your request for a book cover also fills me with grief and consternation. I hate book decoration [...] I find that I must go to the Natural History Museum to ascertain what a bee looks like. So far I can only draw what looks like butterflies or wasps’ (Ricketts 1981: 23). And yet he fulfilled his commission with good grace and considerable accomplishment. There is never a sense of him picking fault for fault’s sake or in order to assert some form of masculine dominance as with many of their other male mentors from Ruskin to Berenson. Ricketts seems never to have regarded them as anything less than artistic equals. What results from this collaboration between poets and artist is a work of great internal and external beauty – the epitome of the book beautiful.

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<sup>57</sup> Field, Michael, BL. Add. MS. 46782, 1894, *fols.* 47r – 48v

<sup>58</sup> *Fair Rosamund* (1897), *The World at Auction* (1898), *The Race of Leaves* (1901), *Julia Domna* (1903)

Further private, domestic events towards the close of the century would prove more tragic. In 1897 James Cooper died while on a walking holiday in the Alps. The resulting grief was to have a major impact upon the work of Michael Field, as well as the arrival of their Chow dog on 26 January 1898 and the emotionally devastating effects of its death in 1906. Both women converted to Catholicism the following year.

As can be gathered from this bare outline, the collection spans a wide canvas of personal, domestic and emotional history. It is not, like its predecessors, a conceptual experiment. However, like them, it is deftly structured to a specific purpose. The book functions – as a whole and in its parts – as a narrative displaying the journey of a poetic consciousness from the profane to the sacred. It is a narrative formed by smaller narrative cycles, little thematic threads, which move increasingly from the impersonal to the autobiographical; as Chris White observes, ‘some of the poems in *Wild Honey* are contextualised within the relationship’ (White 1996: 60). *Wild Honey* constitutes an increasingly private poetry, to the point that it hardly seems intended for an external audience at all. Although there is no specific analogue to this collection, the tradition it evokes is that of the sonnet sequence, which enjoyed something of a popular revival in the latter half of the nineteenth century.

Angela Leighton and Marion Thain, in their different ways, have created a significant commentary on many of the poems in this volume.<sup>59</sup> This chapter will build upon this groundwork by looking at the way the collection functions as a narrative, made up of smaller, connecting sequences, journeying from the open-air aestheticism of the pagan poems to the more domestic, sepulchral atmosphere of the post-conversion works. It is a story not just about changing religious allegiances, but about changing literary styles. The expression of desire, and the ways this is achieved poetically under two differing belief-systems, is an overriding theme, and so is the engagement with decadent tropes. I intend to chart the curious movement from a pagan outlook to a spiritual orthodoxy and aesthetic formalism that after the conversion became increasingly artificial. Although *Wild Honey* feels at times slightly archaic, like a relic unearthed from the nineties, it is also curiously modern in

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<sup>59</sup> Angela Leighton, in *Victorian Women Poets: Writing Against the Heart* (1992) deals mainly with the pagan poems which appear in *Wild Honey*. Marion Thain, in her article on this collection and ‘Apian Aestheticism’, and the chapter on this same subject which appears in her monograph ‘*Michael Field*’: *Poetry, Aestheticism and the Fin de Siècle* (both 2007), seeks to look at how a number of the poems function together as parts of a larger work.

its overall effect. While exhibiting Michael Field's unified voice, in full maturity, it also enacts through its autumnal platitudes a process of gradual decay. In many ways this is a book of death(s): James Cooper's; Whym Chow's; the passing of the old religion; a repudiation of the old ways of loving. But it is also important to see it as a book of rebirth, of hope, regeneration and continuation.

### **Pagan Forces, Pagan Passions**

The pagan strain which threads through much of Michael Field's formative work, beginning with the playful questioning of Arran Leigh's *The New Minnesinger*, suffuses the majority of the poems which comprise the first three quarters of *Wild Honey*. It is clear that throughout the nineties Bradley and Cooper were steeped in mythology and pagan practices, even going as far as building a small altar to Dionysus in their garden. Paganism was not just a Decadent literary poise, it was a way of life, of thinking and feeling. The seeds planted in their early studies in the classics at Bristol University were yielding considerable artistic fruits in the mid to late nineties. There is a strange quality to these pagan poems. In a word it is their intensity, not simply the depth of their learning and understanding, but the extent to which the speaker is immersed in the subject matter. These linguistically dense sonnets and songs are elliptical in their meaning and in the manner that they communicate the specifics of the myth or character they depict. Michael Field appears to be addressing a specific, albeit marginal, audience here: the aesthetic elect which in the minds of Bradley and Cooper included – or at times entirely consisted of – themselves. Moreover, what is presented in these poems is a form (or forms) of desire – aesthetic, sexual, spiritual – which is unfettered, open, and natural: of the earth. It is an irony that while they engage and exhibit Decadent themes and postures, their atmosphere is often refreshingly free of the formal and stylistic artificiality which was a hallmark of much nineties verse by their male peers. In 'The Decay of Lying' Oscar Wilde lamented that 'we have mistaken the common livery of the age for the vesture of the Muses, and spend our days in the sordid streets and hideous suburbs of our vile cities when we should be out on the hillside with Apollo' (Wilde 2001: 172). This is a clarion call which Michael Field appears to have taken to heart. While many of their male contemporaries – Arthur Symonds; Theodore Wratislaw; Ernest Dowson – depict a seamier, metropolitan Decadence steeped in the French

tradition, and many of their female peers such as Alice Meynell and Amy Levy followed Aurora Leigh's missive that 'To flinch from modern varnish, coat or flounce, / Cry out for togas and the picturesque, / Is fatal, – foolish too' (Barrett Browning 1978: 201, 208-10), Michael Field heads for the mountains and forests of the classic past in search of something more liberating and elemental than urban or domestic concerns and constraints.

This all becomes apparent in the arresting opening poem to the collection, 'Pan Asleep', where the god of pastures and song is depicted in a moment of quiet, noontide repose:

He half unearthed the Titans with his voice;  
The stars are leaves before his windy riot;  
The spheres a little shake: but, see, of choice  
How closely he wraps up in hazel quiet!  
And while he sleeps the bees are numbering  
The fox-glove flowers from base to sealed tip,  
Till fond they doze upon his slumbering,  
And smear with honey his wide, smiling lip.  
He shall not be disturbed: it is the hour  
That to his deepest solitude belongs;  
The unfrightened reed opens to noontide flower,  
And poets hear him sing their lyric songs,  
While the Arcadian hunter, baffled, hot,  
Scourges his statue in the ivy-grot.

(WH: 1)

In this sonnet, which adopts the Shakespearean form, a beautiful young male is presented for the contemplation and consumption of the audience. And yet this is a poem of desire with a difference: the body is not evoked in great detail; only a small, almost fetishistic glimpse of the lips, smeared with honey, is given. What interests Michael Field's speaker is not so much the outer appearance of the god asleep, but the latent power and potential destructiveness which lies beneath this tranquil beauty. As Grant and Hazel observe, Pan was occasionally 'a frightening god, as the derivation of the word *panic* from his name suggests; and above all he was angry when his sleep was disturbed' (Grant and Hazel 1973 [2005]: 255, italics in original). Although the scene may be an idealistic pastoral, Pan remains a highly mischievous, even threatening force: he has an energy capable of reducing his surroundings, the cosmos which envelops all creation, into a tremulous, timid landscape: 'The stars are leaves before his windy riot; / The spheres a little shake'. In repose, however, it is he

who appears to lose stature and gain a certain attractive vulnerability, blending harmoniously, perfectly camouflaged, into the surrounding sylvan woodland. The almost unnoticeable reference to the ‘unfrightened reed’ in line eleven is much more significant than it first appears. It refers to Syrinx, a young nymph in the company of Artemis, the goddess of hunting, who, in order to escape the unwanted attentions of Pan, was transformed into a reed bed. Pan then made some of the reeds into his pipes, naming them after her. As her overbearing male lover sleeps, she has the opportunity to ‘open’ and enjoy the freedom of ‘noontide flower’ which his conscious desires have denied her. Also, while his back is turned, Artemis is able to ‘scourge’ his statue. What appears to be a poem celebrating the wild energies of the young god also contains a quiet yet pointed critique of the female subservience to his whims and the potential suffering of women apparently ensnared by heterosexual desires. This is an old, persistent theme within Michael Field’s poetry; as Marion Thain comments ‘The heteroerotic, as always [is] more problematic than the homoerotic’ (Thain 2007a: 232).

Pan has all the vulnerability and the unbounded energy of the adolescent male writ large, with none of the wan, powerless qualities of the Sebastians and Christs which populate *Sight and Song*. The sonnet is a hymn to the energy that he embodies: at once destructive, and carrying the potential for calmness and indifference. Michael Field’s Pan represents the destructive, menacing aspects of masculinity that are explored through the figures of Mercury and other classical deities in previous collections, as well as at the same time possessing the feminised qualities of the beautiful, eroticised male adolescent. The pagan energy which Pan represents, as a force, an essence, has all the ability to seduce, to give pleasure, but also to disturb the status quo.

There is another poem shortly after this, ‘Mintha’, which continues the deep immersion in classical myth as well as the subtle discourse of women’s subjugation – even victimhood – as objects of heterosexual passion:

Dusk Mintha, purple-eyed, I love thy story –  
 Where was the grove,  
 Beneath what alder-strand, or poplar hoary  
 Did silent Hades look to thee of love?  
 Mute wert thou, ever mute, nor did’st thou start  
 Affrighted from thy doom, but in thy heart  
 Did’st bury deep thy god. Persephone

Passed thee by slowly on her way to hell;  
And seeing Death so sore beloved of thee  
She sighed, and not in anger wrought the spell  
Fixed thee a plant  
Of low, close blossom, of supprest perfume,  
And leaves that pant  
Urgent as if from spices of a tomb.  
(WH: 11)

According to the myth, Persephone, when she found out that Hades had seduced Mintha, trampled Mintha under her foot 'whereupon she turned into the aromatic plant mint [...] of which the scent is sweeter the more it is trampled' (Grant and Hazel 1973 [2005]: 223). Michael Field's appropriation of this myth takes many liberties with the original. The opening lines, with the speaker's admission of love for the tale that is about to be related, draws immediate attention to the re-telling and recasting of a pre-existing narrative. In Michael Field's version of the myth Persephone transforms Mintha out of pity for her situation before she can be violated by Hades, knowing full well the fate that she will otherwise have to suffer. Persephone feels empathy, not envy, and takes drastic action to spare her any potential suffering. What is originally a tale of revenge is transformed into a story of female solidarity in the face of extreme masculine threat. Through her physical transformation, Mintha becomes a symbol of suppressed, unfulfilled desires, which Persephone saw as preferable to allowing her to be tainted by Hades/Death in the flesh.

Here, the pagan forces of passionate desire, even when being used for good, can still retain an underlying element of danger. This echoes the depiction of heterosexual desire as presented throughout the earlier poetry collections in the oeuvre. Michael Field appropriates the myth of Mintha in a way which allows for creative manoeuvre both in producing a vividly brooding, pungent atmosphere of sultry, twilit suppression in which to set this small drama of desire, while at the same time transforming it into a critique of the masculine heterosexual threat and the sympathetic bond which exists seemingly universally between women. As in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* it is the human body that is transformed, mutated back into nature by the extremes of thwarted human passions. It is, after all, the perpetually frustrated desires of Mintha herself which make the scent of the plant she becomes so sharp and haunting. It is Mintha's fate to be either violated or perpetually chaste. It is this, as



well as the silent *carpe diem* dénouement of the closing lines which makes the poem so emotionally engaging and complex.

This strain of pagan exoticism, coupled with an intense employment of mythic figures and narratives, adds greater impact to the collection's general discourse on the nature of love and desire. In the sonnet 'The Winter Aphrodite', for instance, the pagan goddess draws from the speaker an invocation suffused with pagan ritual and sacrifice. The poem is an incantation to the distant, icy goddess: 'O winter Aphrodite! (O acute, / Ice-eating pains, thine arrows!) shivering / By thy cold altar-stones, to thee I bring / Thy myrtle with its Erebus-black fruit, / Locked up, provocative, profoundly mute' (WH: 23, 1-5). This sonnet is studded throughout with a semantic field of the silent, secret and the hidden. The speaker is tentatively approaching a reclusive goddess to sanctify a love which she cannot, or will not, openly name. The blessing that the Winter Aphrodite has to offer is not imbued with the promise of spring, the awakened flowers of summer, or the ripened passions of Autumn. It is a love from the vantage point of cold experience; it is enough for the heart to be a mere receptacle, a container or accommodating lumber-room rather than a barren husk, a mere empty space: 'Use thou my heart awhile for Love's own room, / O Winter Aphrodite, ere I die!' (WH: 23, 13-14).

This poem is interesting not just for its depiction of an austere, formidable Aphrodite, but for the re-emergence in the Michael Field oeuvre of that other paragon of female sexuality, Sappho. Her unseen, fragmented words, wrapped around the bodies of the dead, are very much alive in the tomb. They are a tactile reality, but remain shrouded in darkness, denied any voice while 'hid of thee in a tomb' (WH: 23, 11). In 'Fifty Quatrains', the living embodiment of that voice, Sappho in all but name, emerges in the flesh at a royal court to perform her arresting songs:

Of low-voiced women on a happy shore:  
Incomparable was the haze, and bore  
The many blossoms of soft orchard lands.  
'Twas fifty quatrains, for I caught the measure;  
And all the royal house was full of kings,  
Who listened and beheld her and were dumb....  
(WH: 41, 6-11)

The poem is narrated effectively by a third-person speaker, a member of the court, who gives a first-hand account of the spellbinding performance by the unknown

female singer. Indeed, the text depicts the struggle for words, even for an accurate memory of the incident which will do the experience of listening to the captivating strains full justice: ‘Saw her strange raiment and her lovely hands; / And saw ... but that I think she sang’ (*WH*: 41, 4-5). The speaker’s voice stalls and breaks in the active flow of performing his or her recollection in a way that the female bard’s does not: she speaks fifty quatrains fluently by heart, and to her own music. This is Sappho – the woman poet speaking of a mystic isle which is both a liberating aesthetic and sexual space for women – free from the shackles of censorship and textual decimation. No longer in the sepulchre or the depths of the ocean, her body and her song can cheer, enchant and seduce while at the same time it threatens the patriarchal kings who are ‘Too fearful even to ask in whisperings, / The ramparts being closed, whence she had come’ (*WH*: 41, 13-14). Like the Winter Aphrodite, she is a challenging force. Like any other culture ghost, no physical or figurative boundaries can ultimately hold her at bay.

Eros, Aphrodite’s male counterpart, is depicted in a similar fashion. In his case, he, too, is aged. He is an ineluctable part of the destructive yet ultimately regenerative forces of the natural world: ‘O Eros of the mountains, of the earth, / One thing I know of thee that thou art old, / Far, sovereign, lonesome tyrant of the dearth / Of chaos, ruler of the primal cold!’ (*WH*: 143, 1-4). This poem appears much later in the collection, near the close, literally placing masculine and feminine personifications of love at opposite ends of the spectrum. But nevertheless, Michael Field’s depiction of love in this collection, whether in feminine or masculine form, is seen as a solitary, austere and cautionary power: gone are the fleshly cupids and blushing, voluptuous Venuses of the past; this is love and desire as perceived through the eyes of cold wisdom and bitter experience. Love is an external force, as the personifications as Aphrodite, Venus, Cupid, Eros and Sappho suggest, which exist within and through the natural landscape. It is a detached and natural energy which is equally capable of fostering or ignoring humanity. Love is not seen at this moment as being innate within the human spirit, or as something that can be constrained within those dreaded ‘drawing-room conventionalities’ (*WD*: 6). It is something that belongs out in the harsh, free and contrary world of the external elements.

As well as the poems which deal with the mythic dimensions of human sexuality and desire there are those which retain a heady pagan atmosphere but appear to treat of a much more personal subject matter. In particular, there are two

sonnets, 'Penetration' and 'Onycha' which can be seen as companion pieces. In the former, the speaker addresses the beloved, seeking to tell of the constancy of his/her feelings:

I love thee; never dream that I am dumb:  
By day, by night, my tongue beseigeth thee,  
As a bat's voice, set in too fine a key,  
Too tender in its circumstance to come  
To ears beset by havoc and harsh hum  
Of the arraigning world; yet secretly  
I may attain: lo, even a dead bee  
Dropt suddenly from thy open hand by some  
Too careless wind is laid among thy flowers,  
Dear to thee as the bees that sing and roam:  
Thou watchest when the angry moon drops foam;  
Thou answerest the faun's soft-footed stare;  
No influence, but thou feelest it is there,  
And drawest it, profound, into thy hours.

(WH: 13)

The plaintive, besieging voice of the enamoured speaker is constantly in the background, yet at such a pitch only a specific audience, one sensitive to every 'influence', can literally 'feel' it is there, as a tangible force. The apostrophised beloved, alert to all the nuances of the natural world – the dropping of a dead bee; the cycles of the moon; the 'soft-footed stare' of the fauns – is capable of discerning this 'tongue', of drawing it in to themselves. Silently, and without the 'arraigning world' noticing, the lover figuratively penetrates the beloved. As the text stands, there is a real ambiguity to the gender of the speaker and the addressee. If this were a man addressing an unmarried woman or another man, or one woman to another, it would be ample reason for the evocation of a metaphorical penetration, where a literal one would either be socially, morally or physically compromising.

In the poem which appears on the opposite side of the page, 'Onycha', a speaker likewise invokes his/her beloved. But the overall effect is quite different:

There is a silence of deep gathered eve,  
There is a quiet of young things at rest;  
In summer, when the honeysuckles heave  
Their censer boughs, the forest is exprest.  
What singeth like an orchard cherry-tree  
Of its blown blossom white from tip to root,  
Or solemn ocean moving silently,  
Or the great choir of stars forever mute?

So falleth on me a great solitude;  
With miser's clutch I gather in the spell  
Of loving thee, unwooing and unwooed;  
And, as the silence settles, by degrees  
Fill with thy sweetness as a perfumed shell  
Sunk inaccessible in Indian seas.

(WH: 14)

Again, the beloved is absent. At the moment of twilight, the speaker, instead of being overcome with sadness at this physical and emotional distance, becomes enamoured of the surrounding scenery: the heaviness of the scent-laden flowers, the gentle movements of the ocean, and the silent choir of mute stars. The beloved is 'unwooing and unwooed'. This could point to his/her chasteness, or imply that the speaker has not let his/her feelings become known. Unlike the speaker in the previous poem, this one does not crave any form of covert connection. Their complaint can happily spill outwards on the night air, as diffusively as the scent of the flowers. What is important is that the speaker fills with the euphoria of his/her own desire 'as a perfumed shell / Sunk inaccessible in Indian seas.' The beloved will remain inaccessible; this is what creates and maintains the pleasure of desire. Thomas Sturge Moore defines *Onycha* as 'An ingredient of incense made from a marine mollusc, which emits a penetrating aroma when burnt' (SP: 59). His choice of verb is apposite. It is the speaker here who wishes to be penetrated by the sweetness of the beloved, and not the other way around; this is a self-fulfilling passion.

As in 'Penetration', the gender of the lover and the beloved is unspecified and ambiguous. However, Marion Thain in her reading of these two poems has sought to put forward an interesting theory. She reads 'Penetration' as an autobiographical piece, addressed from Bradley to Charles Ricketts. 'Onycha' she sees as 'a love song to Cooper. Paired with the love song to Ricketts, it too interweaves the erotic and the aestheticist voice suggesting a deep interconnection between the two' (Thain 2007a: 232). She sees these two works as displaying the two sides of Bradley's desire: on the one hand a complicated love for Ricketts and on the other, a more straight-forward, but 'inaccessible' love for Cooper. Thain also makes a very neat observation that the two different desires are on different sides of the same page, like the two halves of one whole, a palimpsest where the text shows through to the other side. This is an attractive reading, but one which belies the true subtlety and depth of the poems in question. While I believe that this collection does actively invite – even, to a point,

require – biographical readings, these poems tend to figure towards the close of the collection. I find little in ‘Penetration’ or ‘Onycha’ to attribute them with any certainty to either Ricketts or Cooper, or even to pin down the gender of the speaker or the addressee with any certainty. With the attempt at penetration in the first and the wish to be penetrated in the second, they could be seen as respectively masculine and feminine pieces. Indeed, ‘Onycha’ equates the surrounding landscape with the effects of the invoked beloved: the landscape echoes the beauty of the object of desire just as in the poem on ‘Giorgione’s *Sleeping Venus*’ in *Sight and Song*. However, to muddy the waters of interpretation even further, Thomas Sturge Moore in his *A Selection from the Poems of Michael Field*, gives the two poems subtitles: ‘Penetration’ has ‘(Syrinx to Pan)’ and ‘Onycha’ has ‘(Pan to Eros)’ (SP: 59). In this case, we have a poem where Michael Field is, as Angela Leighton states, ‘reversing the roles and having syrx seduce and penetrate her clumsy, animalesque lover with sweet music’ (Leighton 1992: 241). And ‘Onycha’, rather than being between two women, is actually about desire between two male figures. It is possible that these headings were in the manuscripts and Sturge Moore simply transcribed them.<sup>60</sup> While not taking them as definitive markers of interpretation, they nevertheless point to the ways that these poems on desire can be interpreted in very different ways. It is worth noting that Michael Field left out these headings, perhaps to encourage ambiguity. This is the height of Michael Field’s erotic paganism, where any attempt to categorise and finalise these feelings and their objects should be resisted. Desire for Michael Field, throughout the late nineties and specifically in these poems, is a force without boundaries.

Running parallel to these more solemn platitudes there is a dissident strain of mocking wit, charged with fleshly, pagan energy. It exhibits a serio-comic revelling in the physically macabre which seemingly cannot resist the temptation to lampoon the game of human sexual desire, while at the same time presenting these emotional scenarios with all the appearance of earnestness. For instance, in ‘Embalmed’ the speaker’s desires to be cherished by the beloved, to be coveted, *enshrined*, take on a literalness which is arresting:

Let not a star suspect the mystery!

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<sup>60</sup> It is even possible that he added them of his own accord. Many of the poems in his selected edition are heavily edited with titles added where there were previously none and, in some cases – as noted in Chapter 2, p. 76 – whole stanzas are excised.

A cave that haunts thee in the dreams of night  
 Keep me as treasure hidden from thy sight,  
 And only thine while thou dost covet me!  
 As the Asmonæan queen perpetually  
 Embalmed in honey, cold to thy delight,  
 Cold to thy touch, a sleeping eremite,  
 Beside thee never sleeping I would be.  
 (WH: 26, 1-8)

This is not a loving to death, but beyond it. The speaker wishes to be kept hidden, cool and secret for the beloved's passion. It is a wish to become an object of fetish, a relic of physical passion turned cold, mummified, held in a stasis where desire cannot fade but remains at a constant pitch. Being embalmed is not about self-denial, but is instead a 'figure for being perpetually desired' (Leighton 1992: 236). The embalmed queen is a reference to the wife of Herod – Mariamne – drowned in honey and preserved from physical decay for his visual pleasure.<sup>61</sup> The octet of this perfectly measured and controlled Petrarchan sonnet lays down the speaker's gambit; the concluding sestet takes the suggestion further, positing another possibility:

Or thou might'st lay me in a sepulchre,  
 And every line of life will keep its bloom,  
 Long as thou seal'st me from the common air.  
 Speak not, reveal not ... there will be  
 In the unchallenged dark a mystery,  
 And golden hair sprung rapid in a tomb.  
 (WH: 26, 9-14)

The atmosphere and need of secrecy is intensified. Kept from light, air and the corrupting forces of decay the speaker can lie in the tomb in a constant state of romantic arousal, awake and waiting for the time when the other is laid beside them, although the possibility of touch is not allowed. The final line, as Leighton has noted (Leighton 1992: 236), is a reference to the common myth at the time surrounding D. G. Rossetti's exhumation of his dead wife, Lizzie Siddal. Her coffin was found to be full of her hair which had continued to grow after her death, and which is given eerie currency in his sonnet 'Life-in-Love': 'Mid change the changeless night environeth, / Lies all that golden hair undimmed in death' (Rossetti 2003: 143, 13-14). The spooky, almost questionable ending to Michael Field's poem raises an important

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<sup>61</sup> Bradley and Cooper anonymously published a play on this very subject – *Queen Mariamne* – in the same year as *Wild Honey*.

point which the speaker is trying to make about desire as a force. In this case, it is seen as incorruptible, as potentially enduring as flesh embalmed in the sweetness of honey, as untarnished golden hair in a sealed coffin. The same point is made, but with considerably more decorum, at the end of poem 'XXXVI' in *Long Ago*: 'my heart / Is incorruptible as gold, / 'Tis my immortal part: / Nor is there any god can lay / On love the finger of decay' (LA: 57, 8-12). As Leighton states: 'embalmmment [...] serves as a figure for an entirely responsive and accessible sexual desire' (Leighton 1992: 236). 'Embalmed', forever veering on the edges of decency (never quite in the best possible taste), presents an almost comical extreme – almost laughing in the face of the natural forces of desire and decay – to make an important point about the durability (or otherwise) of the human emotions.

This theme is continued and even heightened to spectacular effect in the sonnet 'The Mummy Invokes His Soul':

Down to me quickly, down! I am such dust,  
 Baked, pressed together; let my flesh be fanned  
 With thy fresh breath; come from thy reedy land  
 Voiceful with birds; divert me, for I lust  
 To break, to crumble – prick with pores this crust! –  
 And fall apart, delicious, loosening sand.  
 Oh, joy, I feel thy breath, I feel thy hand  
 That searches for my heart, and trembles just  
 Where once it beat. How light thy touch, thy frame!  
 Surely thou perchest on the summer trees ...  
 And the garden that we loved? Soul, take thine ease,  
 I am content, so thou enjoy the same  
 Sweet terraces and founts, content, for thee,  
 To burn in this immense torpidity.  
 (WH: 88)

This passionately charged sonnet is a small, masterful example of the deliciously macabre wit that Michael Field achieved at the height of their pagan engagement in the late nineties. The speaker, in a torpor of desire, invokes the freed spirit to quickly descend and satiate the fetid, baking passions which are fostered in the tomb. Unlike the Mariamne figure, this speaker is not kept cool and refreshed in honey, but is dry, flaking, pained by the embalmmment which attempts to arrest the flesh from melting away into decay. This is something which Bradley and Cooper were fascinated by as they inspected the mummies in the British Museum: 'we sniff the mummies [...] The sun at last has reached them in their monstrous secrecy [...] There is horror, but the

calm, immemorial sterility about the expressions. The portraits of the morgue are less shocking – they are printed from transient models: these from incorruptible [word illegible] (or perhaps I should say long suffering) clay.<sup>62</sup> When it comes to the poem, the mummy's vividly drawn physical decay – what Chris Snodgrass has termed 'the ultimate grotesque' (Snodgrass 2007: 174) – is a heightened metaphor for insatiate desire. The wish to 'fall apart' as 'delicious, loosening sand' at the moment the soul re-enters its former home echoes the experience of orgasm. But at the moment this erotic dissolution is imagined the mummy suddenly takes a different perspective: if the soul is happy in the afterlife, then it is enough that at least one of the two enjoys pleasure. After all, following consummation and decay there would be no occasion to spark desire. If the mummy is tortured by the situation, it is a state he/she is willing to bear as an act of loving selflessness, a form of romantic sacrifice for the beloved, while at the same time gaining a form of masochistic pleasure from the deprivation which must be endured.

This is a poem which again calls into question the doctrine of soul sleep which had so troubled Bradley as a young woman and which occurred throughout the poetry collections of Michael Field. Leighton sees the poem as a love poem 'of the body, which invokes its soul [...] as the lost pleasure principle of its own material reality' (Leighton 1992: 235). In other words, Michael Field is not so concerned with the spiritual dimensions of love in these poems, but with the ways in which love and desire are rooted within – and take us back to – a sacredness of the physical body. The body is, after all, where earthly pleasures are centred and experienced. Love, as a harsh, external force, is here taken out of the void and placed within the bodies of these tomb dwelling lovers. This mummy poem appears in a small independent sequence of 'Egyptian Sonnets' which deal with the contemporary fascination over the re-discovery of Egyptian tombs and artefacts. But this poem is the only one of that sequence which can be said to live, truly to engage the reader. This fascination with Egyptology fed generally into nineties poetry, particularly into Mathilde Blind's final collection *Birds of Passage: Songs of the Orient and the Occident* (1895):

Still these mummied Kings of Egypt, wrapped in linen, fold on fold,  
Bide through ages in their coffins, crowned with crowns of dusky gold.

Had the sun once brushed them lightly, or a breath of air, they must

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<sup>62</sup> Field, Michael, BL. Add. MS. 46779, 1891, fol. 33v



Instantaneously have crumbled into evanescent dust.

Pale and passive in their prisons, they have conquered, chained to death;  
And their lineaments look living now as when they last drew breath!

Have they conquered? Oh the pity of those Kings within their tombs,  
Locked in stony isolation in those petrifying glooms!  
(Blind 1895: 24, 81-88)

Blind's poem, in its own way, is as arresting and entertaining as Michael Field's own but there is nothing in Michael Field's tomb-dwellers which could be termed 'pale and passive', or even 'chained to death' despite their physical conditions. (Even the feverish mummy remains unconquered). They are very much alive. It is in the shadow of the tomb that Michael Field finds freedom for desire, not 'isolation'. Death presents a lexicon of the body which provides a covert means of dealing with taboo aspects of fleshly desire while – just – falling within the bounds of decency. Out of the stagnant grave Michael Field has fashioned a poetics which half-laughingly rescues the old pagan pleasure principles of the flesh again in a way that others have not managed to replicate in quite the same ebullient manner.<sup>63</sup>

As the poems progress, there is a movement towards a consideration of the pagan energy, the life-force, which Nature itself represents. Love and desire are disembodied forces with the capacity to create or destroy, and the same is true of the natural forces which govern life and death on earth. In 'A Living Altar', the surrounding landscape, the trees of the forest, are a sacred space: 'Silence behind the colonnade of pines / Is built a temple hidden by their boles: / Below the unlit, grassy hillside rolls / Its pathway space' (*WH*: 64, 1-4). The trees, like the columns of a living temple, create a sacred space of spiritual calm and connection. The tree is a recurring, pivotal trope in the oeuvre of Michael Field, particularly in the pagan pieces, as 'To My Forest-God', from earlier in the collection, demonstrates: 'My Forest-God, thou hast no other name: / Thou art the sap, the strength, the forest-tree / With wings to sing around and cover me; / Thou art my God' (*WH*: 7, 1-4). The tree is a living embodiment of the sacred, a connection point with the pagan energies of the earth. Tree worship was a central part of pagan ritual and belief, as James George

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<sup>63</sup>Michael Field's poetics of the tomb can be seen as extending a tradition in women's poetry which sees death, and particularly embalment, as providing and preserving the individual's sexual agency, which stretches as far as Sylvia Plath in the 1960s in such poems as 'Last Words' and 'Lady Lazarus' (Plath 1981: 172 & 244-7).

Frazer, in his seminal study *The Golden Bough* (1890), has explored at length (Frazer 1998: 82-97). The use of tree imagery in Michael Field's poetic oeuvre will change significantly after the conversion as it is supplanted by the cross, but here the tree is a means of connecting with the primal, regenerating elements of the earth.

And yet, of course, there are poems which emphasise the opposite side of Nature's apparently benign, spiritually invigorating capacity. Nature inspires as much fear and awe in this world view as it does reverence. In 'After Soufrière', a poem which deals with a real life natural catastrophe<sup>64</sup>, the sentiments expressed are not in any way emotional at the loss of life. Nature is not chastised for the ensuing devastation, the reader is not even impelled to engage emotionally with the disaster in any way. The tone is remarkably matter of fact: 'It is like the sudden void / When the city is destroyed, / Where the sun shone: / There is neither grief nor pain, / But the wide waste come again' (WH: 34, 8-12). The destruction of the city is just like the 'even dropping of the rain' (WH: 34, 2), or the 'rise and falling of a wave / When the vessel's gone' (WH: 34, 6-7) in the first stanza. Nature stands aloof, emotionally indifferent. Destruction is as essential a part of the natural order of waste and decay, as much as birth and creation. A destroyed city is just a way of nature reverting to the void, 'the old order of what was there before' (Leighton 1992: 240).

Alice Meynell would treat of the same subject in her poem 'Messina, 1908' with more sentimental, even saccharine emotiveness: 'Lord, Thou hast crushed Thy tender ones, o'er-thrown / Thy strong, Thy fair; Thy man thou hast un-manned [...] our shattered fingers feel / Thy mediate and intelligible hand' (Meynell 1940: 111, 1-2 & 11-12). In Meynell's world view, God may be the destroyer, but he is also the healer: there is some meaning to be found in the seemingly aberrant and shocking catastrophe. Michael Field's pagan view of nature is of something immense and sacred, but in the end indifferent to human emotions. God is completely out of the picture. Michael Field's is an invigorating, chastening world view, but one which requires the mature acceptance of the individual; in a world where there is no centrally presiding figure of universal justice, it is better to face the indifference of fate with the same attitude.

When looking into the workings of nature, Michael Field, like Wordsworth, sees divine spiritual forces working in harmony. However, Michael Field does not at

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<sup>64</sup> This refers to an earthquake which struck Messina in 1908.

this juncture share the view of humanity's, or even God's central place in this universal system. Indeed, Cooper would write scornfully of Pantheism: 'the way of Pantheism [...] vaguely trusts in nature [...] to redeem and save and sanctify' (*WD*: 318). To Michael Field, it is better not to 'trust' nature, but rather to respect its natural rhythms, its beauties and its awesome capacity for destruction. This view is more aligned to the second generation of Romantic writers – who lacked a Christian belief of nature as an instrument of God – and particularly Percy Bysshe Shelley: 'This wilderness has a mysterious tongue / Which teaches awful doubt, or faith so mild / So simple, so serene that man may be / In such a faith with Nature reconciled' (Shelley 1989: 570, 77-80).<sup>65</sup>

Nevertheless, Michael Field's view of nature's indifference to humanity should not be seen as a wholly cold, isolating thing. In 'Nests in Elms', a more reassuring perspective is presented:

The rooks are cawing up and down the trees!  
 Among their nests they caw. O sound I treasure,  
 Ripe as old music is, the summer's measure,  
 Sleep at her gossip, sylvan mysteries,  
 With prate and clamour to give zest of these –  
 In rune I trace the ancient law of pleasure,  
 Of love, of all the busy-ness of leisure,  
 With dream on dream of never-thwarted ease.  
 O homely birds, whose cry is harbinger  
 Of nothing sad, who know not anything  
 Of sea-bird's loneliness, of Procne's strife,  
 Rock round me when I die! So sweet it were  
 To die by open doors, with you on wing  
 Humming the deep security of life.  
 (*WH*: 62)

The rook's harsh cawing is a 'ripe' ancient, runic language which details the primal laws of pleasure. It is a language – ever present to the ears of man, but perhaps not pitched in an attractive enough key for some – fitted to communication of 'leisure' and 'ease'. The final lines about dying by open doors while the rooks sing of the 'security of life' echo Keats's lines from 'Ode to a Nightingale': 'Now more than ever seems it rich to die, / To cease upon the midnight with no pain, / While thou art pouring forth thy soul abroad / In such an ecstasy!' (Keats 1958: 259, 55-8). Keats's language, along with the emotion, is far more intense – his speaker longs to die (in

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<sup>65</sup> From 'Mont Blanc. Lines Written in the Vale of Chamouni'.

another metaphor of orgasm) at the moment of perfect, sublime connection with the disembodied voice of the Nightingale. Its voice is consoling, but only for a limited time; like all high art it proves vague, elusive. The voice of Michael Field's rooks is much more readily accessible. It is a primitive, homely language, preaching not of Parnassian connection, but of the domestic, universal joys. These birds are preferable to the more majestic and mystical albatross and nightingale – both central Romantic tropes – because they express nothing of loneliness and sadness. They create a background music of the simple pleasures of existence. It is a music intended for their own purpose, not performed for humans, much like the sound of the threshing trees in Edward Thomas's 'Aspens' which 'must shake their leaves and men may hear / But need not listen' (Thomas 1991: 138, 19-20). The sacred ur-languages of nature will continue whether or not they are heeded or understood.

### **Autumnal Tones**

After the meandering stream of pagan sonnets and the short sequence of Egyptian sonnets, there follows another small sequence of poems which again deals primarily with nature. In the sequence 'Mane et Vespere'<sup>66</sup> there are no elemental hymns to the power of Nature as a personified force. Rather, it consists mainly of elegies, dirges to the passing of summer and the gradual onset of autumnal decay. Many of these poems represent some of Michael Field's best nature poetry, based upon close observation with a wistful undercurrent stemming from the ageing of the year. Indeed, in the context of the collection *Wild Honey* these poems represent a gradual change in the overall climate of tone and theme. In 'July', Michael Field shows nature on the very cusp of transition from plenitude to decay. Autumn has not yet fully arrived, but it is nevertheless beginning to make its advent felt: 'The white-faced roses slowly disappear / From field and hedgerow, and no more flowers come; / Earth lies in strain of powers / Too terrible for flowers' (WH: 105, 10-13). This is the month of 'hush and blaze' (WH: 105, 18), of 'passion at its heat' (WH: 106, 23), but even at the zenith of summer is the opening of the path into dissolution. Its arrival is heralded in the sonnet which follows it, 'The Forest Year':

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<sup>66</sup> Literally 'Morning and Evening'. It sets the tone for the movement from light to darkness which the small sequence, moving from summer to autumn, represents.

Frailness of Time! O bitter moment drear!  
 Lo, the green summer learns that she must die!  
 Down the damp fungus-path the forest year  
 Comes weeping to the forest. Silently  
 The untarnished firs drop stubborn some few spines;  
 A flicker trembles through the moist sweet-gale;  
 The sunflower, high above the brake, declines  
 Her head untoward o'er the garden pale.  
 The winter woods no more will feel the clip  
 Of rose, of woodbine garland, glossy leaf  
 Of creeping briony. . . . Ah, but a brief  
 Spinning of dewy webs, a little while,  
 And the slack flowers in bunches will down-drop,  
 Tumble and waste into the holly pile.  
 (WH: 107)

This sonnet is a measured, skilfully structured piece. The poem presents the onset of autumn as a form of collapse. After the Summer learns of her on-coming death, the firs shed spines; roses and woodbines cease to grow; the flowers of the garden slowly descend their heads to the earth. An atmosphere of moist decay is drawn through the semantic pattern woven throughout by words such as 'damp', 'weeping', 'moist' and 'dewy'. This has a very tactile effect, as of vegetation gradually emitting its moisture, succumbing to fungal decay. The movement towards autumnal decline is also worked into the sound-structure of the poem. The alliterative *t* sounds of the first line (with its gentle atmospheric ghosting of Milton's 'Lycidas'<sup>67</sup>) have a hardness, a solidity which melts into a more resigned, gentle sibilance in the poem's middle section (lines 2 to 7) as the gentle waning of summer is described. In the concluding sestet there follows more alliteration, but this time on words that begin with – and contain strong stresses on – the letter *w*. This creates again a soft atmosphere, a winnowing refrain as though of the growing breezes which will from now torment the garden. But it also contains elements of a greater dissolution. Scattered throughout the last six lines, like leaves from a tree, are the alliterative 'winter', 'woods', 'woodbine', 'webs' and, in the last line, 'waste'. These words, as though breathed by a rising wind of change draw in the reader's eye to the poem's meaning: winter and waste, joined in this way, are seen as the same thing. The woods, its flowers and plants, as well as the speaker, are all ensnared in a web of inevitable loss which will lead to barrenness. In Keats's

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<sup>67</sup> 'Yet once more, O ye laurels, and once more / Ye myrtles brown, with ivy never sere, / [...] Bitter constraint, and sad occasion drear, / Compels me to disturb your season due' (Milton 1998: 41, 1-2 & 6-7).

‘Ode to Autumn’, there is at least the sense in the enigmatic final line ‘And gathering swallows twitter in the skies’ (Keats 1958: 274, Line 33), that spring will continue, even if somewhere else, before returning. And Shelley’s doubtful question at the end of ‘Ode to the West Wind’ – ‘If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?’ (Shelley 2002: 301, 70) – contains (even begs) the sureness of an affirmative answer. No such assurances are offered in Michael Field’s sonnet, however. Even the structure, with the octet in strong, regular Shakespearean *ababcdcd* mode, then shifts in the final sestet into a more random, diffusive *effgeg* pattern which, along with the half-rhyming ‘clip’ and ‘drop’, ushers in uncertainty and collapse. Despite its surface beauty, this poem presents a bleak picture of the ageing year which finds within the universe of a single moment little promise of future plenitude beyond all of the oncoming ‘waste’.

In ‘Leaves’ the dissolution is complete. ‘Where are they?’ asks the speaker, ‘I have never missed before / The whole wide kingdom of the cherishing leaves’ (WH: 112, 1-2). The trees are bare, the ruined choirs of the branches are exposed, but of the golden heaps of the once green, spirit inhabited leaves, there is not the slightest sign:

For, lo, a sudden ravishing bereaves  
The air that threaded them, the earth that bore!  
And now of all their gorgeous, solemn realms  
No sign: of unseen arrows came their fall;  
They are not. Clematis and ivy curl  
Their wavering tissues on the river wall –  
Nothing afloat: the river a dark pearl;  
The jagged acacia and the misted elms.  
(WH: 112, 7-14)

The leaves – and the nymphs – have departed. The speaker moves from their contemplation of the lost leaves to depicting the scene in the surrounding garden: the hardy clematis and the ivy are left, but all else is barren: both water and sky are opaque. Again, the speaker is left in an increasingly strange, disconcerting landscape with the onset of autumn. There is something more internal, some unspoken inner change, some deep-set anxiety which these speakers feel is echoed in the external autumnal scenes, but something which they choose not to voice. A curious factor of this sonnet is the many echoes which it contains of Shelley’s ‘Ozymandias’. I believe that the line ‘The air that threaded them, the earth that bore’ is a dissonant, though noticeable reference to ‘The hand that mocked them, and the heart that fed’ (Shelley

2000: 311, 8). The two lines conclude the octet in each sonnet. They both refer to the unseen force which has created the barren scene in front of the speaker: in Michael Field's case, the invisible wind has dissipated the kingdom of leaves; in Shelley's poem it is time which has laid waste to tyranny, as well as the sculptor's full artistic vision. Both poems end with the speaker turning from their musings and looking into the barren wastes of their surroundings: 'boundless and bare / The lone and level sands stretch far away' (Shelley 2000: 311, 13-14), and 'Nothing afloat: the river a dark pearl; / The jagged acacia and the misted elms.' I believe that Michael Field had Shelley's 'Ozymandias' in mind, deliberately using it as a crib for a poem about a lost 'kingdom', not just an empire of leaves, but also a whole belief system, centred in nature and the cycle of the seasons, that had started to collapse.

Shortly after the close of 'Mane et Vespere' comes the sonnet 'Renewal'. This is not the first time that this sonnet has appeared in the poetic oeuvre of Michael Field: it closed the third edition of *Underneath the Bough*, and has been mentioned in Chapter 4. What promised a future for the poetic career of Michael Field at the end of the final manifestation of *Underneath the Bough* here enacts that same promise of change, but within the centre of what is effectively a large poetic narrative. The speaker and the reader may have reached a point of possible barrenness and despair, but 'renewal' promises a bright future. As mentioned in Chapter 5, the speaker compares her/himself to the phoenix, burning itself up in order to 'range / Alone through the untarnished sky I love, / And I trust myself, as from the grave I may, / To the enchanting miracles of change' (WH: 120, 11-14). After the anxieties expressed surrounding the onset of waste and decay, there is here a purifying rebirth. But it is one brought about by fire, which must entail a degree of loss and pain. The extent of this suffering will be seen in the closing sections of the collection. But here, at least for the moment, it is the herald of self-renewal, and, moreover, of survival.

### **'The Longer Allegiance'**

However, before there could be a new birth of any kind, there had first to be a death. This came, both in the life and in the book, in the form of James Cooper. On 24 June 1897, he vanished while on a walking holiday with his younger daughter Amy. His body was not discovered until 25 October. While his body was still missing, Bradley and Cooper were beset by fears that he had been murdered. Even

when he was found and it was deduced that he had fallen accidentally down the cliff-face there was still a lingering anxiety: ‘The mystery is as deep as ever – it will be hard to keep the mind from hunting, hunting [...] but no more, no more!’ (WD: 226-7). But their minds had been hunting, and would continue to do so. The latter part of *Wild Honey* contains a sequence entitled ‘The Longer Allegiance’ which begins with sonnets written about and to the absent James Cooper, imagining almost obsessively the point at which his body lay. There is then a movement through the poems from more intensely pagan themes to ones which lead, through intense grief, to a questioning again of Christian faith. This small sequence enacts a narrative which moves from the death of a literal father-figure towards more orthodox channels of faith. This is not the full biographical or poetic trajectory of Michael Field’s move to Catholicism, but it is fascinating for the way in which a far more private, introspective lyricism is adopted.

‘The Torrent’, which opens the sequence, is an attempt to probe the ‘mystery’ of the sudden absence: ‘And here thy footsteps stopped? This writhing swell, / This surging, mad, voluminous, white stream, / Burst staring from the hills, knows what befell / That instant in the clear midsummer beam?’ (WH: 137, 1-4). It is an emotionally fraught, linguistically violent piece which futilely attempts to probe beyond the boundaries of imaginative perception to some form of unattainable truth. A more measured, resigned note is struck in the succeeding sonnets which imagine the body of the missing one returned to nature, and in her care, as in ‘Burial’:

They found thee – Nature burying her dead,  
Covering thee o’er with her dead summer dress:  
Shrunk spikes of blossom lightly did she toss,  
And the brown needles of the fir-tree spread  
Thick as a cloak about thee,  
[...]

we found  
Nature alone that waited on thy sleep,  
Suffering no other eye on that strewn ground,  
None nearer to the stars to watch with her.

(WH: 141, 1-5 & 11-14)

In absolute solitude nature, like a mother, tends the dead. The corpse is gently wrapped – as a sleeper prepared for bed – in order to be returned to the earth. This is a very tender piece, with all of the tortured bewilderment of the first sonnet now gone. In its place, the speaker is gradually reconciled to the loss as the body of the



beloved is reconciled physically with nature. Although a victim of the harsh terrain, the dead is delicately and lovingly looked after. There is no sense of the macabre here as in other more objective reflections about the dead. The atmosphere is still strongly pagan. It is enough to know, or at least to imagine in absence, that the dead is now, physically as well as spiritually, in the care of permanent elemental powers.

Although many of these sonnets deal with the physicality of the dead – desperately trying to imagine the tactile presence of the absent loved one, ‘Invocation’ is a more intense, even problematic address to the immortal spirit of the dead:

Ah me, but what a trysting place is here  
Upon the trail of thy mortality!  
Still am I found beside thy forest bier;  
O lingering ghost, still keep thy tryst with me!  
Thou art, I know, long since a soul in bliss,  
There should I look for thee – yet stay awhile!  
I would remember me how thou did'st kiss,  
And part upon the pressure of thy smile.  
I love, ah, not thy shadowy Paradise,  
I love the very ground where thou hast lain,  
This herbage that took record of thine eyes;  
And where they faded there would I remain.  
Love, leave thine azure heaven, the woods are brown,  
Wizard, tempestuous, sheltering, full of night – come down!  
(WH: 145)

In this extraordinary piece the tone has changed dramatically. After the haunting apostrophes to a dead body comes a piece which addresses the living soul and implores it to return to earth once more (as in ‘The Mummy Invokes His Soul’) in a manner which sounds more like a lover asking his or her beloved to sport amidst the shades of the forest. The point at which the dead lay, melting into the earth – ‘This herbage which took record of thine eyes’ – amongst the trees whose ‘pre-Christian lurking-place’ (Leighton 1992: 220) which is outside of the governance of heaven, hell, or any man-made morality is the most apt place for this transgressive, ambiguous meeting. Leighton has noted that Michael Field, or more specifically Cooper, invokes her father ghost ‘to sport in the shade’ as she would any lover (Leighton 1992: 220). This is a probable and valid reading. The language of romantic and filial passion crosses over and becomes intensified by grief and longing. But although these sonnets are rooted heavily in biography, there is again a careful lack

of gendering in these pieces. It is perhaps best to allow a degree of poetic and dramatic licence to Michael Field at this point, who is taking an original emotion from an actual incident and forging something from it that transcends the primary sense of grief. Either way, what is created is an intensely heartfelt, romantic and pagan lyric which goes a long way in reconciling the fraught emotions which have led to this point.

This poem brings to an end the works which had their origin in the death of James Cooper. Just a few pages later there is a piece which strikes a completely different tone to the somewhat heated pagan lyricism of 'Invocation' as for the first time in the collection, and also since the poetry of Arran Leigh, there emerges a voice in 'The Heavenly Love' which speaks directly to God: 'Thy love, O God ... nay, thou art not the end. / Thy love, but not that I may love thee back; / Something in mine own loving that I lack / I ask thee for' (*WH*: 148, 1-4). However, this is not yet a state of complete supplication. It addresses God directly, but in a very loose and casual way. (This will later become a hallmark of Bradley's post-conversion poetry as Michael Field). But what this poem importantly marks at this point in the collection is the sudden sense of a 'lack'. The speaker notices that there is a discrepancy in the way that he/she loves compared with the Christian God: the speaker lacks an ability to sever the self from the beloved dead in the way that God can easily dismiss the sinners into hell without remorse. It is this 'simpleness' (*WH*: 148, 10) that the speaker craves, the ability to lose, as it were, and forget: 'Teach me to love Thy instant way, and then / Look not that I should turn to thee again!' (*WH*: 148, 13-14). This address to God is quite scathing, criticising the Christian attitude to the dead, while at the same time admitting the exhaustion of constant griefs that 'drag on my desire' (*WH*: 148, 12).

However, just two sonnets later in 'The Love of God', these harsh sentiments have softened somewhat. The poem opens with the speaker's reconciliation to earthly loss: 'Nothing there is on earth we may not lose, / Nothing quite firm: we lose the spring each year, / The sun each day, the flowers as they appear' (*WH*: 150, 1-3). Elizabeth Bishop expresses similar sentiments some seven decades later in 'One Art': 'Lose something every day. Accept the fluster / of lost door keys, the hour badly spent [...] places, and names, and where it was you meant / to travel' (Bishop 1999: 178, 4-5 & 8-9). In both instances we have the aesthete coming to terms with terrestrial dissolution. What now worries Michael Field's speaker above anything is

the possibility of losing the love of God. A great spiritual distance has been travelled from 'The Heavenly Love' to this poem: 'I choose / All to forego, all to obliterate / Sooner than miss remembered joy of Thee' (*WH*: 150, 8-11). Indeed, by 'To God', the speaker wishes God to 'lift me to Thy ken' (*WH*: 153, 1). Again, this is not perhaps the correct tone of supplication, but it shows the extent to which there has been a swift change of spiritual allegiances within the collection. The 'old allegiance' of this short sequence is at once the one of Bradley and Cooper to their former domestic life, ruled over by James Cooper, the Victorian patriarch, and is also about the dying off of the old pagan allegiances and the birth of something altogether more orthodox.

### **The New Allegiance**

Following on from 'The Old Allegiance' is an untitled sequence of thirty poems which closes the collection. What they do as a whole is to express the atmosphere of change brought about by the conversion to Rome in 1907, although this is not overtly referred to in these texts. As the book closes, the themes and imagery do become increasingly religious, even specifically Catholic, but the sonnets which open this final loose section are love poems which express the long endurance of a particular passion between the speaker and the beloved. These are intensely personal poems which directly refer on one level to the relationship between Bradley and Cooper where the elder expresses her continued love for her niece ('Old Ivories', 'Balsam', 'Nightfall'), and her feelings following her near fatal illness and gradual recovery ('Dying', 'Festa', 'Background'). They can, indeed, be read independently as lyrics in their own right, but together they form a narrative that at once attracts and excludes the reader, who remains as a spectator listening in on a private conversation riddled with ellipses that draws upon every-day domestic imagery and personal experience: 'all the day / We of ourselves sweet memories can make; / Nor other boon we crave than thus to stay / Watching the mists together at sunbreak' (*WH*: 170, 10-13). These lines from 'Balsam' are representative of the general softening of tone, the abandoning of a more ornate diction for something increasingly direct, unadorned and intimate. This linguistic softening is linked with effective formal experimentation in the arresting 'Palimpsest', a poem which marks a seismic turning point in Michael

Field's poetic oeuvre as the speaker acknowledges there must be a break with the freer lifestyle of the last century:

. . . The rest  
Of our life must be a palimpsest –  
The old writing written there the best.

In the parchment hoary  
Lies a golden story,  
As 'mid secret feathers of a dove,  
As 'mid moonbeams shifted through a cloud:

Let us write it over,  
O my lover,  
For the far time to discover,  
As 'mid secret feathers of a dove,  
As 'mid moonbeams shifted through a cloud!  
(WH: 180)

This can be interpreted as a self-reflexive acknowledgement on the behalf of Michael Field that everything which will follow the conversion to Catholicism will be of lesser aesthetic worth than that of the past. The story may be more sacred now, but it will not be 'golden'. The poetry will continue, as it must, but it will not be 'the best'. The guttering shape of the text, its opening ellipse visually recreates the impression of an ancient fragment of text. Catholic doctrine would require a total repudiation of the pagan past, but, despite the defacement which is required, this writing over – the violating act of erasure – paradoxically works in this instance as a means of preservation. To cover something up in a manner which leaves traces of what lies beneath invites further investigation from the audience.<sup>68</sup>

The trope of covering over is a powerful one in the canon of Michael Field's poetry. In *Underneath the Bough* it is invoked as a means of presenting the courtship between two literary voices in the Third Book; even the ekphrastic poems of *Sight and Song* are a means of over-writing one meaning with another interpretation, as the poem 'Benozzo Gozzoli's *Treading the Press*' (SS: 20-1) demonstrates. The same is

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<sup>68</sup> There exists a copy of *Wild Honey* in the collection of R.K.R Thornton which was sent from Bradley and Cooper to 'The very Revd. the Prior of Holy Cross'. Many of the more flagrantly pagan or possibly blasphemous poems have been crossed out ('To My Forest-God'; 'The Woods are Still'; 'To God'). The manner in which they are crossed out – their titles deleted from the Contents page and the poem struck through with a cross – only serves to draw attention to what lies beneath. There are two poems 'Gethsemane' and 'That He should taste death for Every Man' which are stuck into the book, but no such attempt is made to conceal the deleted items.

true of the biographical dimensions to the late poems in *Wild Honey* – they constantly invite a more personal, not necessarily reductive, reading. These late sonnets and songs in *Wild Honey* that deal with the maturing, adapting love between the speaker and the beloved are a way of affirming the continuation of the Michael Field voice in the face of change, as ‘Medes and Parthians’<sup>69</sup> shows: ‘We have a little while been twain. / Now set us of one piece again, / O Holy Ghost, so that we hear each tongue / As if committed to one song’ (WH: 181, 5-8). This could simply be the speaker asking for a reunion with God, but it also invites the reading that the author, either Bradley or Cooper, is asking for the continued alliance of poetic voices, now realigned after the turbulent years of the early to mid 90s, so that God may hear the newly sanctified praise of Michael Field ‘commingled such / Thou dost snuff in the odour of one bush!’ (WH: 181, 13-14). As will be seen in the next chapter, this optimism at continuing in one voice was premature.

As the collection closes, a new figure comes into the equation: Whym Chow. Having been Bradley and Cooper’s constant companion following the death of James Cooper, he had come to represent the vital male other in their domestic make-up; a sort of homely pagan trinity. When he died in 1906 aged just seven years old, the grief that the two women felt was absolute. Within a year they were both Catholics. As Camille Cauti has remarked, ‘this Chow dog they fancied as a little lion was much more than a mere friend and companion; he seemed to them like a divinity that had taken on animal form’ (Cauti 2007: 182). I shall address the role of the Chow more fully in the final chapter and the conclusion, but his appearance at the end of *Wild Honey* is significant and worthy of mention. After his death, Bradley and Cooper wrote a series of intense poems to the dog, detailing the high passion of their grief. ‘I write nearly two poems to Whym Chow in the morning’ wrote Cooper on 10 February 1906, and then ‘Pace the room all afternoon, while my Love reads me Boccaccio – *Our Flower of Wrath* story.’<sup>70</sup> These poems in their bulk were left in manuscript until 1914. A few of the more temperate of these pieces made their debut in *Wild Honey*, such as ‘The Minute-Hand’:

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<sup>69</sup> This title is more than likely an incorrect reference to Medes and Persians from the Book of Daniel, a system of Law which never changes: ‘The thing *is* true, according to the law of the Medes and Persians, which altereth not’ (Dan. Vi, 12). This can be seen as an assertion that the blended voice of Michael Field, two writers as one, is an unassailable fact, regardless of religious creed.

<sup>70</sup> Field, Michael, BL. Add. MS. 46795, 1906, fol. 32v



When *Wild Honey* was published it was greeted with the sort of praise which had eluded Michael Field since the 1880s. One particularly glowing instance is an anonymous review in *The Academy* on 8 February 1908:

‘Wild Honey’ is one of the most delightful books that the last ten years have given us, and should be read by every lover of poetry. [...] Anyone who has taken Pass Moderations and read Tennyson can produce a piece of verse on a classical subject [...] one in a thousand can feel that the gods are not dead, but only changed and less joyful [...] The lyrics in this volume seem to vibrate with a passionate love for every aspect of life, its joy, and beauty, and pain...

(Anon. 1908: 437-8)

Despite its being known that ‘the two poets’ who write as Michael Field are women, there is a marked shift in tone here from the earlier review of *Bellerophôn* where Bradley and Cooper’s classicism was mocked for its amateurish nature. Ironically, it is the poems which express this neo-paganism which gained them renewed praise at the very time when they have repudiated this way of living and writing. The reviewer chose to look not at the new allegiances proposed at the end of the book, but at the richer, more golden text which still lies glistening beneath.

*Wild Honey* is a curious though seminal work in the Michael Field poetic canon. Florence S. Boos is quite right in claiming that the sonnets and lyrics in this collection place Michael Field as ‘the most original and arresting’ of what she terms ‘the eclectic modernists’ who take up Dante Gabriele Rossetti’s sonneteering mantle (Boos 2004: 272). This book, with its play on common decadent tropes of waste and decay, and the focus upon increasingly Catholic allegiances would already have seemed quaint in 1908 when the early modernists were first beginning to write their formative works. However, with its narrative complexity, its multiple ungended personae and the blurring of fiction and biography, history and the domestic, it is also highly innovative and more forward looking, perhaps, than many single collections of poetry produced in the 90s. And yet, the final poems of the book only hint at the direction which the future trajectory of the Michael Field poetic oeuvre will take. Although the advent of Catholicism had ushered in a new aesthetic, moral and sexual code by 1908, traces of the old religion, the old artistic and romantic allegiances are still there and would remain so, just peeking below the surface in even the most devout works. The old gods would indeed survive, but in a much sadder form,

clothed in more ecclesiastical garb. Very soon, with the diagnosis of Cooper's cancer in 1911, their religious feelings and devotional poetry would intensify to new levels, and the Michael Field voice – here united, innovative, freshly speaking as though from the tomb of doubt and obscurity – would completely split in two.



## **Chapter 7. Separate Voices, United Passions: Style and Desire in *Poems of Adoration* (1912) and *Mystic Trees* (1913)**

On 28 January 1906 the defining moment in Bradley and Cooper's later life – and in the career of Michael Field – occurred: their beloved pet dog Whym Chow died. In the journal, Cooper recorded her intense sense of loss: 'Today I have had the worst loss of *my* life – yes, worse than that of beloved mother or the tragic father – my Whym Chow, my little Chow – Chow, my Flame of Love is dead + has died – O Cruel God'.<sup>71</sup> This statement may appear hyperbolic, but the process of grieving for the dog in public and in private, in the journal and in the poetry, would only intensify over time. Proof of this is given in many letters written by Charles Ricketts, calling for an end to the constant stream of lamentation:

It is now two months that you have bored & distressed me by references to the death of your dog. Not only do I dislike the degradation of the majesty of grief, but in the event of this so praying [sic] on your mind, it should be your duty to try and put order & a little silence in the place of this angry din of regret [....] Please consider that I am quite deliberate in saying that I hope you will soon regain the ordinary mansuetude of thought & speech common among the elect to whom I belong.

(Ricketts cited in Delaney 1990: 205)

Ricketts and many others, though clearly frustrated by the situation, still saw in it an opportunity for pointed humour.

But Bradley and Cooper could not see anything remotely humorous about their loss; never again would their thought and speech quite 'regain the ordinary mansuetude' of their former life and works. As mentioned at the close of the preceding chapter, they immediately poured out their suffering into a series of poems to the dead Chow which would remain largely unpublished for eight years.<sup>72</sup> When reviewing the events of 1906 Cooper noted:

For years I have worshipped the Holy Trinity, ever since I prayed,  
and Michael prayed, for the little earthly Trinity, Whym Chow,  
Hennie and Michael, to the ineffable Divine Trinity – that symbol  
all creators must adore, who attain to its fastness of Life. Closer

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<sup>71</sup> Field, Michael, BL. Add. MS 46795, 1906, fol. 15v

<sup>72</sup> As shown in Chapter 6, a few of the Chow poems appeared in *Wild Honey* in 1908.

than ever was this worship when Whymmie died and in the midst of this great mystery loomed for me an altar, as the symbol of sacrifice, of Love unto Death and beyond it forever.

(WD: 272)

When the Chow – the third, masculine, animal element – died, this domestic Trinity suddenly became interchangeable with the ‘Divine Trinity’ of Father, Son and Holy Ghost. In this way, by exchanging one belief system for another, the dog, in death, could continue as a presence in their lives. He had essentially – or so they felt – sacrificed himself so that they could be saved from profanity. It was he who proved the catalyst in their conversion to Rome. After visiting Mass for the first time on 2 December 1906 Cooper recorded: ‘We went to Mass, and the prison walls of our life fell as we prostrated ourselves before the one perfect symbol, and all we love was with us, included and jubilant. Demeter and Dionysus (our lord Bacchus) yield themselves up as victims to the great Host, the Saviour of the World’ (WD: 273). Although adopting Catholicism offered a guarantee of life after death it also meant a break with the past; for everything that was gained there was an equal loss. As seen in the poem ‘Palimpsest’, the freedoms of the past, the old gods, had to be sacrificed for the sake of the new, purified identities. But, as that poem hints, the past is never far away, always lurking below the surface. It is possible to see the Michael Field conversion as simply changing the altar decorations; Catholicism, after all, offered a sound spiritual structure to belief while at the same time retaining many of the elements of pagan ritual. The reality, however, is more complex and poetically productive: the often parallel pagan and Catholic allegiances create what Marion Thain has called a ‘dynamic as exhilarating as that found in the earlier work’ (Thain 2007b: 168).

As seen in Chapter 6, the movement to the Church greatly affected the way in which Bradley and Cooper composed lyric poetry, but it certainly did not affect the output. If anything, the period from 1906-13 was one of their most prolific periods since the early 1890s. Catholicism gave a whole new range of subject matter and imagery to draw upon, as well as a new, all encompassing focus of desire. However, what the conversion did serve to do was finally to separate the dualised Michael Field voice. Galvanised by Cooper being diagnosed with cancer in 1911, the two women embarked on preparing two books of devotional poetry: *Poems of Adoration* (1912) and *Mystic Trees* (1913). The former was wholly the work of Cooper, the latter by

Bradley.<sup>73</sup> The final collections offer not only the opportunity to assess the effect of Catholicism upon the style of the two writers, but to actually quantify, to an extent, what the lyric qualities of the two halves of Michael Field were.

Bradley and Cooper were not unique in their generation of writers in converting to Rome: John Gray (Wilde's one time muse was later ordained and corresponded closely with Bradley), Oscar Wilde, Lionel Johnson, Francis Thompson – not to mention the French Decadents such as Huysmans and Verlaine – as well as more peripheral figures such as Vincent O'Sullivan and Francis Adams all preceded Michael Field. It has been typical to see the conversions of these male artists as part of a fashionable trend, a decadent cult – mostly homosexually inclined – that was attracted and to some extent sheltered by the Church. It may seem paradoxical that so many gay writers were attracted to a religious creed which ostensibly outlawed them, but, as Ellis Hanson states, it proved 'a suitable stage on which to perform', as 'homosexuality is not essentially at odds with Christianity [...] the sexual difference of homosexuality inevitably inflects the particular style of religious experience' (Hanson 1997: 24). Indeed, Bradley and Cooper's status as women converts, and their lateness in joining the Church – not to mention their very genuine religious feelings – places them in a more modern, more cosmopolitan and overtly 'lesbian' group of writers such as Renée Vivien, Una Troubridge, Natalie Barney and Radclyffe Hall, who all converted around the time these poetry volumes emerged.<sup>74</sup> 'Michael Field' may pass as an archetypal *fin de siècle* male convert, but beneath the masculine surface, something more covert and interesting is taking place. It is essential to see this late religious poetry of Michael Field – free, for a time, from the presence of Whym Chow – in the context of the *fin de siècle* but also in the wider context of religious poetry in the British canon, reaching back to mediaeval Passion poetry and the baroque effusions of the English Metaphysical poets.

The post conversion poetry of Michael Field has tended to perplex, polarise and even embarrass many critics, to the extent that some have ignored it completely. The reasons for this are twofold: on the surface, this devout poetics has very little to

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<sup>73</sup> There was a further collection of devotional lyrics authored by both women which appeared as *The Wattleford* in 1930, drawn from unpublished manuscripts and edited by Emily C. Fortey, who had been bequeathed the texts. However, it is the two collections, structured and published by Bradley and Cooper as Michael Field, which are of greatest interest to a critic of the oeuvre.

<sup>74</sup> An excellent discussion of how these later lesbian writers reconciled a self-awareness of their sexuality with their religion is found in Joanne Glasgow's essay 'What's a Nice Lesbian Like You Doing in the Church of Torquemada? Radclyffe Hall and Other Catholic Converts' (1992).

interest those concerned with the lesbian aspects of the Sapphic verse, or the aestheticism of the ekphrastic works or the pagan allegiances of the middle period. Secondly, there is the awkward fact of Whym Chow. To ignore the late devotional collections of Michael Field in favour of their readily accessible early works is to miss out on a vastly important stage in the late arc of the poetic oeuvre. It is also to miss out on some of the most arresting, entertaining and even bizarre poetry to emerge under the Michael Field name. *Poems of Adoration* and *Mystic Trees* are elaborately crafted echo-chambers where all of the major themes and tropes of the early work still vibrantly resound, mixing and morphing with the more sombre and august tones of sacred devotion. These books are as concerned with gender, sexuality, aestheticism, motherhood and the complex relation of the sacred and the profane as anything which has preceded them.

Angela Leighton has written dismissively of the late religious lyrics that ‘Faith did not re-energise their poetry, but turned it, paradoxically, to the very flaccid and flowery decadence which they had largely avoided before’ (Leighton 1992: 223). And yet, there have been a few recent critics who have disagreed with Leighton’s dismissal of this late poetry.<sup>75</sup> This chapter will treat each book in turn, as separate entities by different writers, but which are at the same time but two halves of the one voice: Michael Field. What most sets Michael Field’s religious poetry aside from that of the other figures of the time is its quality, daring, and the accumulation of meaning built up throughout the entire poetic oeuvre from the very first collection by Arran Leigh, *The New Minnesinger*. These works are two of the most passionate and poignant expressions of desire – in all its forms – in the Michael Field lyric oeuvre.

### **Poems of Adoration (1912)**

Cooper’s volume of poetry was published in April 1912, a whole year before Bradley’s collection. On its own, it proves to be a fascinating enterprise; Cooper’s style in this book emerges as something quite distinct; it is a work which is formally dense, but Cooper manages to develop at certain points a free, discursive form which is quite original in the Michael Field poetic canon to this date. Most notably, *Poems*

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<sup>75</sup> Ruth Vanita (1996), Frederick S. Roden (2002 & 2007), Kit Andrews (2007), Chris Snodgrass (2007), Camille Cauti (2007), Hilary Fraser (2001) and Marion Thain (2005 & 2007) have all written eloquently of the importance and pleasures of the post conversion poetry.

*of Adoration* allows ‘Michael Field’ to emerge as a writer of baroque religious verse, equally at home with the medieval and Metaphysical poets as with more modern figures. As a collection, it is not divided into titled thematic sections; rather, it is a progression of individual lyrics which loosely move through a fluctuating series of themes: the life of Christ, his Passion, and the life of the Virgin Mary. There are occasional fascinating digressions as the book progresses, but it begins and ends by contemplating closely Christ’s sacrifice on the cross.

However, at this stage it is important to elaborate a little more on the term baroque in relation to Michael Field’s late poetic style. I have applied this term quite freely at times up to this point when referring to a prosodic style which is at its most flamboyant, dramatic, or visually and verbally stunning. The baroque, as a style across the arts, flourished chiefly from the early to mid seventeenth century. When talking of baroque art, we are usually referring to music, or, more particularly, the visual arts: painting, sculpture, architecture. The baroque in literature is a more slippery concept, particularly in relation to the English poetic tradition. The most commonly accepted manifestations occur in the religious poetry of Donne and Herbert, but most famously in the Catholic devotional poetry of St. John Southwell and Richard Crashaw. There is something innately religious, essentially Catholic about the baroque poetic style which Austin Warren characterises as ‘exuberant, rhetorical, sensual, grandiose’ (Warren 1957: 65). The Cuban theorist Severo Sarduy describes the literary baroque as ‘an overflowing cornucopia, renowned for its prodigality and dissipation [...] a mockery of all functionality, of all sobriety’ (Sarduy in Kaup 2005: 91-2). If Warren’s definition of the baroque can be said to apply to Michael Field’s pre-conversion, pagan poetry, then Sarduy’s description even more appropriately captures the change in tone and atmosphere which Catholicism affected. There is, after turning to Rome, a sense that Bradley and Cooper – as Leighton claimed – fell into a formal Decadence, a flowery verbosity for its own sake. But Frank J. Warnke, in his definition of baroque poetry, identifies what saves Michael Field’s late style from the arid and turgid utterances of their male Catholic peers, an essential sense of play: ‘the elements of jest and sport are still there [...] Baroque poetry [...] may be both serious and not serious, and [...] may partake simultaneously of the frivolous, the dramatic, and the profound’ (Warnke 1964: 455). It is this streak of subversive formal and thematic frivolity which makes the late style of Michael Field so arresting and engaging. Cooper and Bradley’s quite different

appropriations of the literary baroque together form one of the purest manifestations of baroque poetry in the canon of English religious poetry.

The opening poem, 'Desolation', is an enigmatic and arresting piece which sets the thematic tone of the collection, as well as highlighting the compromised – or rather, hybrid – theological allegiances of much of Michael Field's greatest religious verse. The poem opens with a mysterious figure, arrayed in red, walking across a bleak, thunder-lit landscape. In the second stanza, he emerges into clearer focus as the speaker describes his strange, gory appearance:

Behold,  
O clustered grapes,  
His garment rolled,  
And wrung about His waist in fold on fold!  
See, there is blood now on his garment, vest and hood;  
For He hath leapt upon a loaded vat,  
And round His motion splashes the wine-fat,  
Though there is none to play  
The Vintage-lay.

(PA: 1, 11-20)

The image is stark and uncompromising. A lone figure, dressed in garments drenched in red – in 'blood' – which is the stain of the red grapes which they have 'leapt' upon. This figure is a wine-treader, but is certainly not one of the care-free, jubilant figures from an earlier piece such as 'Treading the Press' who enjoy sensuous revelry, tingeing the wine with their pleasures: 'Wine that kindles and entrances / Thus is made by one who dances' (SS: 21, 17-18). Here, with the mingling of wine and blood imagery to the point where they become interchangeable, the wine-treader's occupation is at once more mysterious and loaded with greater symbolic value. This figure is no Bacchic reveller: he works in solitude, beyond the aid of any other human. The blood imagery, connected with the theme of solitary sacrifice (and the capitalised personal pronouns) all emphasise that the lone figure is in fact Christ:

The Word  
Of God, His name . . .  
But nothing heard  
Save beat of His lone feet forever stirred  
To tread the press –  
None with Him in His loneliness;  
No treader with him in the spume, no man.  
His flesh shows dusk with wine: since He began

He hath not stayed, that forth may pour  
The Vineyard's store.

He treads  
The angry grapes . . .  
Their anger spreads,  
And all its brangling passion sheds  
In blood.

(PA: 1-2, 21-35)

Christ, in his loneliness, is un-resting. Treading the grapes of wrath, he bursts them in a spreading 'anger' of red, which is shed as blood. Unleashing the fearful juices of the grapes, Christ stands amidst 'The fume, the carnage, and the murderous heat!' (PA: 2, 37) but manages, through his courage and fortitude, to transform the occasion, and the growing lake of blood, into something more benign and nourishing: 'all is changed by patience of the feet: / The blood sinks down; the vine / Is issued wine' (PA: 2, 38-40). From the churning mess of the wine-vat a grape-treader produces wine; in a similar way, Christ's sacrifice of his own flesh – the violent shedding of his own blood – becomes an act of redemption, a symbol of absolving, Divine love.

Blood and wine are one and the same thing, as in the Sacrament the wine takes on the agency of the redemptive blood of Christ. The image of Christ as wine-treader 'with limbs that wade / Among the berries, dark and wet' (PA: 2, 48-9) is both intriguing and visually powerful. The fluctuating rhythms of the lines, with their apparent freeness coupled with the rich, fecund sounds of the words themselves – 'spume'; 'flesh'; 'dusk'; 'brangling' – re-create the movement of Christ amidst the almost palpable liquid storm which issues from the grapes as the blood issuing from his own dying body. Although wine is a central symbol in the Catholic Sacrament, it is also central to Bacchic worship. This poem is so effective, arguably, for the allegiances which it shows between pagan and Catholic, sacred and profane. Each spring, Christ's blood is offered in symbolic sacrifice for God's forgiveness. In much the same way, Bacchus was worshipped in sacrificial rituals in return for a good harvest. This poem echoes the prose-poem 'An Agony' from 'For That Moment Only' where Bacchus hangs, Christ-like, from the vines of the vineyard. There is also another implicit echo of Schreiner's 'The Sunlight Lay Across My Bed': 'his beard was long and white, and his beard had been dipped in wine; and because the sleeves were wide and full they held much wine' (Schreiner 1890 [2003]: 35). But now, the wine-drenched master-of-ceremonies has been replaced by Christ. Pagan and Catholic

are, in this sense, quite sympathetic belief systems in the mind of Michael Field, each complementing the other more than they contrast. Christ is Bacchus, no less sensuous in body and action, but with a heightened moral resonance.

If 'Desolation' is a unique meditation upon the Passion of Christ, then the following piece, 'Entbehren Sollst Du'<sup>76</sup> is much more conventional. This is immediately apparent from a formal perspective, the poem being structured into quatrains instead of loosely rhymed ten line stanzas. It is a straightforward, chaste depiction of the crucifixion: 'Stripped of vest and garments Thou didst lie, / Mid hill-moss, / Naked, helpless as a nurse's child, / On thy cross' (PA: 3, 17-20). This poem becomes, quietly and delicately, a direct plea to Christ for a humble knowledge of his suffering and sacrifice: 'Help me, from my passion, to recall / Thy sheer loss, / And adore the sovereign nakedness / Of Thy Cross!' (PA: 4, 33-6). This pared down lyricism, which has none of the clash and drama of the opening piece, feels more personal. The poem dramatises the need of the speaker to quantify and appreciate the enormity and glory of Christ's sacrifice: it literally abstains from all poetic excess. In 'Fregit'<sup>77</sup>, which follows, this almost domestic prosody and plain address melts away to be replaced by something much more intense, heated, even ferocious:

O my God, there is the hiss of doom  
 When new-glowing flowers are snapped in bloom;  
 When shivered, as a little thunder-cloud,  
 A vase splits on the floor its brilliance loud;  
 Or lightning strikes a willow-tree with gash  
 Cloven for death in a resounding crash;  
 And I have heard that one who could betray  
 His country and yet face the breadth of day,  
 Bowed himself, weeping, but to hear his sword  
 Broken before him, as his sin's award.  
 These were broken; Thou didst break. . . .  
 (PA: 5, 5-26)

Through a sequence of images this poem depicts the death of Christ, the metaphorical shattering of his body as foretold in his breaking of the bread at the Last Supper. Christ's body is not seen in fleshly terms, but in a series of images which emphasise his fragility and vulnerability: the snapped-flower of his form has a doom-laden 'hiss'; the vase of his body – the vessel of God's bounteous Love – explodes like a

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<sup>76</sup> 'Thou Shalt Abstain.'

<sup>77</sup> He / It Broke.'



thunder-clap. This second stanza, in pentameters, is laden with verbal sound effects which heighten the sense of sudden violent breakage: from the onomatopoeic ‘hiss’ and ‘crash’, the sharp sibilance of ‘shivered’, ‘splits’ and ‘strikes’ to the reverberating *a* and *o* vowel sounds, which whip through the stanza, like a powerful blast or vibrating sound-wave. The closing stanza shifts to a more incantatory note: ‘Thou the Flower that heaven did make / Of our race the crown of light; / Thou the Vase of Chrysolite / Into which God’s balm doth flow’ (*PA*: 5, 16-19). This tightening of the rhythm ushers in a sense of liturgical chant; Christ is being addressed directly, in almost official tones. This is the first time in the collection that Christ’s body has been compared to a flower, but it is a trope which will recur constantly through the rest of this book, as well as in Bradley’s. It has the curious effect of communicating Christ’s vulnerability and beauty, drawing – as will be seen later in greater detail – upon a metaphorical lexicon usually reserved for depicting femininity and female sexuality. While these images do create a very vivid and dramatic atmosphere, they are nevertheless oddly artificial ways of depicting the body of Christ. They are arresting, even satisfying; taken together they are a pure baroque effusion, tinged with a slightly static Decadent style. The repetitions in the last four lines – ‘Thou, betrayed, Thyself did break / Thy own Body for our sake; / Thy own Body Thou didst take / In Thy holy hands – and break’ (*PA*: 5, 23-6) – create a haunting sense of the speaker’s awareness of Christ’s sacrifice, but this sacrifice, and its full emotional impact, are not fully communicated to an outside audience. They remain frozen upon the verbally and visually brilliant surface of the piece which has all the sound and fury, but none of the blood and the passion.

One of the most fascinating depictions of Christ and his self-sacrifice which exhibits all of the hallmarks of the elaborately baroque occurs in ‘Nimis Honorati Sunt’<sup>78</sup>:

‘Cast not your pearls down before swine!’  
 The words are Thine! –  
 Listen, cast not  
 The treasure of a white sea-grot,  
 An uncontaminated, round loveliness,  
 A pearl of ocean-waters fathomless,  
 A secret exceeding, cherished light,  
 A dream withdrawn from evening infinite,

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<sup>78</sup> ‘They are Honoured in the Highest’

A beauty God gave silence to – cast not  
 This wealth from treasury of Indian seas,  
                   Or Persian fisheries,  
 Down in the miry dens that clot  
 The feet of swine, who trample, hide and blot.  
                   (PA: 16, 1-13)

The poem opens with the image of the pearl too precious to be wasted on the unworthy. For the next twelve lines the first stanza rhapsodises upon this image, opening it out, elaborating further and further, almost losing itself in its own unfurling visual diorama. This evocation of the pearl's 'round loveliness', its innate secrecy, beauty and ultimate inaccessibility echo both 'A Girl' from *Underneath the Bough* and 'Onycha' from *Wild Honey*<sup>79</sup>. In all cases, the pearl is emblematic of female sexuality, of a passion and beauty that is at once highly prized and pleasurable, but at the same time enigmatic and shaded in secrecy. In the second stanza, the speaker makes it clear that, in this case, the pearl beyond price is the Word of Christ, and also, by the same token, his own body: 'Wilt Thou so madly in the slough be cast / Concealed 'mid tramlings and disgrace of swine? / O Host, O White, Benign! / Why spend in rage of love at last / Thy wisdom all eternity amassed?' (PA: 16, 22-6). This speaker, bedazzled by the beauty of Christ's wisdom and form, cannot quantify why he should seek to sacrifice himself for a humanity which is seen as mired in filth and ignorance. In this instance the speaker places aesthetics over utility; they cannot understand, given Christ's directive, that he would place pain and suffering before his own comfort. In spite of its rhetoric and artifice, this poem is an intriguing piece which questions not only the nature of Christ's sacrifice, but the contradictions which arise from his own teachings. All of this is presented and dramatised in a style which is a fine example of the flamboyance and fluidity of imagery in the baroque style. The depictions of Christ in this poem and the others at the start of the collection – as saviour, martyr, and object of devotional and sexual desire – are striking works which create an atmosphere, by turns charged by the grandeur and artifice of the baroque, which infuses – almost like incense – the rest of the collection.

Following the various contemplations of Christ, there emerges a loose movement of poems which dwells closely upon the Virgin Mary. She becomes in her

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<sup>79</sup> 'A girl, / Her soul a deep-wave pearl / Dim, lucent of all lovely mysteries' (UTBa: 68, 1-3); and 'thy sweetness as a perfumed shell / Sunk inaccessible in Indian seas' (WH: 14, 13-14).

own way as central and potent a figure in the collection as that of her Son. ‘Columba Mea’<sup>80</sup> is a direct address to her, asserting her immaculate state as prospective mother of God, her essential stainlessness: ‘Beyond all shade, / In whiteness of the Godhead of God’s throne, / That loves in utter white’ (*PA*: 22, 18-20). In ‘Virgo Potens’<sup>81</sup> her young life is shown, replete with all the qualities and perfections which will typify and mark out her later fate. Such poems literally do tend to ‘write white’. Gone is all of the blood, drama and baroque staginess of the poems on the passion. It is as though Mary, paragon of all perfections, awakes within Cooper a pious reverence which fails to colour her poetry in a way that can appeal to any external party. However, this situation changes significantly and sufficiently in ‘The Garden of Lazarus’. Here, the speaker relates how Mary, having been left alone by her Son in a garden as he goes to attend what will be The Last Supper, grieves because ‘she knows Passover Day / Will not leave her Lamb, her child unslain’ (*PA*: 28, 8-9). The poem is a beautifully crafted, delicately understated piece which hauntingly voices the inner fears and emotions of Mary as she realises that her son, as Son of God, will soon have to leave her, expressing her internal emotional plight through the imagery of the garden at sundown:

O Mother, Mother, Mother! –  
 But she keeps so many things apart  
 In their silence, pondering them by heart;  
 Always she has pondered in her heart;  
 And it knows her Son is Son of God. . . .  
 Silently she gazes where He trod  
 Down the valley to Jerusalem –  
     His Mother!  
 Round her birds are at their parting song  
 To the light that will not strike them long;  
 And the flowers are very gold  
 With the light before whose loss they fold.  
 Keen the song, as on each wing,  
 And on each rose and each rose-stem  
     Full the burnishing.  
 She hath crossed her hands around her breast,  
 And it seems her heart is taking rest  
 With some Mystery her spirit heeds. . . .  
 Song of Songs the birds now chaunt,  
 And the lilies vaunt  
 How among them, white, He feeds,

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<sup>80</sup> ‘My Dove.’

<sup>81</sup> ‘Powerful Virgin.’

Who but now hath left her – fair and white...  
(PA: 28-9, 18-39)

After the incendiary baroque effusions which Christ elicits, this is beautifully simple and moving in comparison. Mary is not shown in a whiter-than-white state here – aloof in her perfection – but as a mother, left alone with her thoughts, fearful for the fate of her only son. Around her, as she comes to terms with her feelings, nature carries on unheeding: the flowers are bathed in gold by the setting sun, the birds are singing their erotic ‘Song of Songs’. But this outer scene is representative of the inner calm coming over Mary as her heart is gradually ‘taking rest’ from the inner Mystery in which she and Christ play central roles. What is striking is the normality of Mary, her fallibility to human emotions, her enduring love and fear for her son. What this poem marks is a prolonged meditation on one of the central themes of the Michael Field poetic oeuvre: motherhood. It was not placed centre-stage in *Wild Honey*, but in *Poems of Adoration* and later in Bradley’s *Mystic Trees* it is of primary importance. At the close of the section quoted above, both Christ and Mary, it is implied, in their whiteness, among the white lilies of the garden, are themselves flowers of one stem who have now been parted. This idea of Mary and her Son as flowers – almost sister-like – is one which Bradley will later pick up to tremendous effect. Motherhood is a close, holy pact between Mother, Son, and Holy Ghost. But here, Mary represents not only the plight of the Mother of God when faced with the loss of her son, but, in her flesh and blood reality, the plight of all suffering and bereft mothers.

In ‘Pax Vobiscum’<sup>82</sup>, Mary is again the central focus of the speaker’s apostrophe. But now she is addressed directly, reverently, as the mighty Mother of God. She is no longer a simple, suffering woman of flesh and blood, but an awe-inspiring, all-encompassing and immaculate deity, goddess-like in grandeur and beauty. What is particularly striking about this almost potentially clichéd and formulaic address is a slight echo which draws comparison between Mary and Michael Field’s other universal mother figures:

My heart is before thee, Queen,  
As a mariner at sea –  
It vows its sighs that swell to thee,  
Sighs as great as against waves may be.

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<sup>82</sup> ‘Peace be With You.’

For thou art above the waves,  
On their summits thou dost float;  
Thy locks of gold along thy throat;  
Thou more gold than gold upon thy boat.  
(PA: 33, 1-8)

Mary, alone upon her vessel, floats above the tumult of the mountainous waves which the speaker must navigate. The picture which emerges of Mary in the second stanza is curiously familiar, being reminiscent of the earlier depictions of Venus upon her scallop shell ‘with locks / In possession of the wind, [...] a girl who seeks to bind / New-born beauty with a tress / Gold about her nakedness’ (SS: 135, 5-6 & 8-10). In the final line of ‘Pax Vobiscum’ is a definite echo of one of Sappho’s most famous fragments: ‘Far sweeter of tone than harp, more golden than gold’ (Wharton 1885: 137).<sup>83</sup> In this way, Cooper, as Michael Field, is showing the value of Mary’s purity, and yet is concurrently drawing a quiet comparison between one of the central figures of the Catholic Church and the greatest female poet of Classical antiquity (as well as the Greek goddess of Love). They are, essentially, interchangeable tropes for Michael Field, two sides of the same coin. Sappho is by no means as pure in the flesh as Mary, but they are both all-encompassing mother-figures. This comparison also hints at the erotic subtext which runs through many of the poems to and about Mary: as the figure of ultimate female purity, the immaculate mother, the unreachable, though teasingly ever-present centre of devotion, she is the ultimate object of fetishistic fantasy and worship. It is seemingly no heresy for Michael Field to hold and express these views; the sacred and profane paragons of female sexuality and motherhood merge and mingle comfortably. Mary may now be the female focus of desire, but the voices of all her predecessors can still be heard amidst the surface devotional pomp. The old writing is still visible and vibrant just beneath the new.

In *Poems of Adoration* Mary emerges as a second protagonist, a female counterpoint to the masculinity of her son. This balancing of male and female forces in the collections of Michael Field is not a new thing, but its significance and meaning have shifted. In the past, masculine and feminine forces were commonly in either open or covert conflict, which was seen as an unavoidable side-effect of their sexual power struggles. Here, with Mary and Christ, the relationship is different: they are not sexual lovers, so the tensions which plague many of the male and female

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<sup>83</sup> This is labelled as being fragments 122 & 123 in H. T. Wharton’s edition.

couplings of previous collections are now absent. The depiction of Mary and her Son will be further elaborated by Bradley with occasional erotic undertones, but never in a manner which suggests their relationship is compromised by their gender differences. In these two figures, Michael Field manages to find a model which harmonises and concludes the struggle between masculine and feminine forces which has run throughout the entire poetic oeuvre.

Aside from these serious meditations upon Christ and his mother there are, as the collection progresses, occasional pieces which consider other Biblical figures such as St. Mary Magdalene, St. John, and – perhaps surprisingly – Salomé. What is intriguing about these poems is that they reveal a streak of playful, even outlandish revelling in baroque poetic excess. While these works are still intended as serious reflections on religious matters, and though they could never be deemed intentionally humorous or self-parodying, there is certainly a level of self-awareness in their almost decadent opulence of imagery and style.

For instance, a curious example is ‘In the Beginning’, which depicts the close physical relationship between Christ and St. John. Drawing upon passages in the Gospels, Michael Field fashions a lyric in which the Disciple and Christ are locked in an embrace, and where the language of religious love hovers upon the boundaries of more secular – and subversive – passionate desires:

Then the raised Face  
Breaks soft and the eyes droop and bend above  
The sweet head's place,  
Where from closed eyelids John  
Setteth his love upon  
God, his Lord, his Thought, his Lover dear:  
And, in lapse of silence falling clear,  
One heareth only this –  
On the sweet head, a kiss.  
(PA: 36, 18-26)

John, raising his face from Christ's breast looks into his face; closing his eyes in rapt devotion, Jesus kisses him. No words are spoken. John may have later written that ‘In the beginning was the Word’ (John, I, 1), but here the only language is that of the body, of physical touch. It is possible to see this as a metaphorical exploration of John's powerful devotion to the Godhead, but at the same time it is impossible to

ignore the palpable homoerotic undertones of the piece. While Cooper is fashioning a religious lyric in private, it reaches the world – as always – as the work of Michael Field. As such, it can be read as part of a tradition of writing which focuses on the love between Jesus and John to express latent homosexual desires while dressing them as purely religious works. As Graham Robb has noted: ‘The notion that Jesus and John loved one another like husband and wife had been a theme of early medieval literature and iconography’, and was ‘constantly being rediscovered’ by each succeeding generation (Robb 2003: 241). Michael Field’s Christ may be the masculine force in *Poems of Adoration*, but like Sappho his desire is multi-faceted, liminal and universal. He represents both masculine and feminine, hetero and homosexual potentialities at once.

In ‘Relics’ the focus of physical desire has become more recognisably feminine. The burial ritual of St. Mary Magdalene is described in detail: following the resurrection of Christ, she had spent her life in solitude and reverent peace, keeping with her in her hermit’s cave ‘A vase of golden curls, / A clod of blooded earth’ (PA: 43, 27-8). The curls are culled from her own hair which she had used to wipe the blood from Christ’s feet; the clod of earth is stained from where his blood fell while on the cross. After her death, Maximin is charged with the task of laying her remains to rest: ‘So Maximin gave Magdalen to God – / Shut as a spice in precious stone, / In bland and flushing box / Of alabaster stone’ (PA: 44, 36-9). Magdalen’s body is stowed away, ‘spiced’ and preserved in a shut box like a precious object and offered up to God. Magdalen, a keeper of relics, has become a relic herself. She is not alive in the tomb like Mariamne or the lusting Mummy from *Wild Honey*, suffering from insatiable physical desires, but her body is, without doubt, prepared and presented as an object of desire, even fetish. Michael Field is again revelling in the old love for relics and their connections with the lost physical world of the past, but beneath the seriousness of their role in worship, there lies a sense of their potential subversiveness, their ability to allow a degree of covert pleasure in carnal desire. There is even the possibility that relics represent a masculine attempt to contain and control the feminine, to re-write the questionable past of the Magdalen and place her, like the Sleeping Beauty, within a solid, pure mythology – which the alabaster sarcophagus represents – while the truth, her physical body, is hidden beneath, fit only for God’s eyes.

However, the poem which clearly stands alone in the collection for its aesthetic extremity and luridness of theme is 'A Dance of Death'. Here, the protagonist is a beautiful, ghostly female figure seen dancing upon a lake of ice on a cold winter's day. Regarded closer, there is something increasingly uncanny about the solitary dancer. She is not skating at all, 'But only tip-toe dances in a whirl, / A lovely dancing-girl / Upon the frozen surface of the stream' (PA: 66, 23-5). It becomes clear that this is Salomé exiled with Herod and Herodias to a western land. The scene in which she skates is an icy, formidable echo of her own internal cruelty and emotional winter. Like many of the dancers which preceded her in Michael Field's verse, Salomé's dance on the ice is an assertion of her freedom, but is also now a decadent gesture of her considerable power, selfishness and supreme self-containment. She remains the one point of fluid motion in a frozen, static world. However, this does not last long. The ice begins to thaw, and, nightmarishly, she glimpses the severed head of the Baptist beneath the water. Then comes a scene which, after the stately stillness and beauty of the opening stanzas, is quite unique in its extremity. As the ice splits, Salomé falls between the cracks:

Her head was caught and girded tight,  
And severed by the ice-brook sword, and sped  
In dance that never stops.  
It skims and hops  
Across the ice that rasped it. Smooth and gay,  
And void of care,  
It takes its sunny way:  
But underneath the golden hair,  
And underneath those jewel-sparks  
Keen noontide marks  
A little face as grey as evening ice;  
Lips, open in a scream no soul may hear...  
(PA: 69-70, 79-90)

The poem has moved from the serene and austere beauty of the winter scene to surreal, gory horror at the conclusion as Salomé's severed head skids, screaming silently, across the melting ice which has severed it. It is an extraordinary moment where all restraint seems to have been abandoned. Detail after gory detail – the colour of Salomé's hair, the greyness of her face and the posture of a scream – follow quickly upon each other, as though the speaker is caught in a fantasia of gothic, baroque excess. The poem is visionary, nightmarish. Having no origin within the



Bible, it is an example of Cooper's continued ability for sheer formal exuberance and poetic playfulness after her conversion. The poem is intensely moral, but the manner in which it is told perfectly side-steps any possible slip into didacticism. This is Michael Field at the height of decadence, but it is not a poetics of formal deadness or moral collapse. Indeed, quite the opposite. The chief triumph here is the diffuse, flexible form which allows a shift from narration to intense lyricism at the turn of a line, and permits the swift, garish flow of image upon image at the end. It is proof that Cooper's post-conversion poetry as Michael Field, which does have an overarching tendency to the overly rhetorical and the artificial, can at moments be as innovative and arresting as that which has gone before, generating what Thain has called a 'camp quality' – or what might likewise be termed a baroque profuseness – which 'is not entirely unselfconscious' (Thain 2005: 330).

Overall, Cooper's collection of religious lyrics as Michael Field is a challenging, often chastening poetic production. At many points the reader may feel frozen out of the emotional experience. This could be taken to be a lack of emotional investment in the subject matter on Cooper's behalf, but actually the reverse is more accurate. These poems are so specific to Cooper's own personal beliefs and interests in doctrinal matters that anyone outside – even her own aunt and collaborator – may struggle to engage or identify with the majority of them. However, it is wrong to write off the post-conversion poetry which Cooper publishes under the Michael Field banner, not merely for the occasional flashes of the former brilliance and a newer – though often suppressed or under-developed – sense of formal freedom, but also for the fascinating treatment of the tropes of masculinity, femininity, motherhood and sexuality which are elicited under a rather staid religious mantle. Cooper, alone, may lack the essential humour and lyric freshness which is apparent when she writes with Bradley, yet nevertheless *Poems of Adoration* is by no means an unalloyed formal or thematic dead-end.

### **Mystic Trees (1913)**

It was to be a whole year after the publication of *Poems of Adoration* before Bradley's *Mystic Trees* appeared in print. When the proofs arrived on 5 March 1913,

Cooper remarked that Bradley's book seemed a 'strange, lambent book, most dear, most mouventé – almost devoid of calm; full of sudden beauties, startling in their impatience of assault on the imagination.'<sup>84</sup> Cooper could be describing her own collection here, with its stately rhetoric, restless forms and occasional flashes of decadent and baroque brilliance. But although the books share the same religious objectives and subject matter, they are quite individual works of literary art. The difference was noticeable enough to strike Bradley, who commented of her collection on 23 March 1913: 'The impression left on my mind is the great flaw of the individualism – Michael & God are the only two personages – if Hennie & I could sing the Church & God! [...] There is so little in this book to help souls along! Priests and nuns meditate on Henry's verse.'<sup>85</sup> What grieves Bradley is the separation of the combined Michael Field voice, which she can only see as being to the detriment of herself and her own poetic talents. Cooper's collection is pondered by the religious elite for its theological import, but her book, it would seem, without the devoutness of Cooper, is doomed to be ignored at best, because, as Emma Donoghue states, 'she thought [her poems] addressed God with too much familiarity and not enough awe' (Donoghue 1998: 137). As we have seen, Cooper's work is certainly a cerebral affair, but if she created a book of intellectual devotional lyrics, then Bradley's collection consists of the essential, balancing, emotional side. *Mystic Trees* constitutes a fitting tribute to the end of Katharine Bradley's poetic career, which closes, ironically, as it started over forty years before, as a solo affair.<sup>86</sup> What makes the poetry of *Mystic Trees* so fascinating and engaging is not only the frequent playfulness of her imagery and style, but the very factors which gave Bradley so much cause for private concern: her openness in addressing the Godhead and issues of divinity. (This was nothing new to her, as Chapter One illustrates). Although Bradley's Catholicism in her life and her work appears devout, there is more of a freeness in her beliefs, a greater interplay between Christianity and the pagan passions of the past. She feared for some time that she would be refused admittance to

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<sup>84</sup> Field, Michael, BL. Add. MS. 46803, 1913, fol. 30v

<sup>85</sup> *ibid*, fol. 30v – r

<sup>86</sup> Bradley would publish two further collections as Michael Field in 1914 following the death of Cooper. But, as will be seen in the final chapter, the greater majority of the poems in these works was dated to either 1906 or earlier. *Mystic Trees*, therefore, stands as a monument to her late individual poetic style, and the marker of how far she had travelled aesthetically and thematically since her youth.

the Catholic Church on the grounds of her lingering pagan leanings,<sup>87</sup> but in her work at least, both spiritual and aesthetic allegiances appear not so much in open conflict, as in harmony. The book is divided into three main sections: ‘Hyssop’, ‘Cedar’ and ‘Sword’, giving the work an overall feeling of order and narrative progression which Cooper’s work lacks. In this sense, the collection is more authentically a ‘Michael Field’ text. Not all of the poems are successful, effective or memorable, but many of them surely rank among the best works of the Michael Field poetic oeuvre.

### ‘Hyssop’

The poems in ‘Hyssop’, the opening section of *Mystic Trees*, deal primarily with Jesus Christ, scenes from his life and particularly his Crucifixion. Bradley’s depiction of Christ is similar to Cooper’s in the way that he is the dominating male force of the collection but also in the way that he complements the femininity of his mother. Cooper often feminised the masculinity of Christ, but Bradley takes this further, expanding upon the use of highly sexualised flower imagery to depict both his physical body and his relationship with his mother.

The primary focus of ‘Hyssop’ is the Passion of Christ. These poems resemble Cooper’s in the way that Christ is seen in quite feminised terms and as a focus of the speaker’s desire, but Bradley’s differ in their strength and intensity; they take their leave from Cooper, but their fleshliness is writ-large, as in ‘The Captain Jewel’: ‘We love Thy ruddy Wounds, / We love them pout by pout: / It is as when the stars come out, / One after one’ (*MT*: 27, 1-4). Christ, wounded and supine, is the ultimate object of desire, depicted in barely shaded sexual terms. His wounds, as they appear ‘pout by pout’, entice the gaze of the speaker ‘As watchers for the Morning Star’ (*MT*: 27, 6), rousing his/her desire even further. There is a distinctly feminine, almost labial quality to the wounds of Christ; as Camille Cauti has noted, depiction of Christ’s wounded side in medieval and Renaissance artwork ‘suggests a vulva more than anything else’ (Cauti 2007: 186). Indeed, this sense is increased in the final stanza when the Roman Centurion ‘Openeth Thy Side: Water and Blood there beat / In fountain sweet’ (*MT*: 27, 10-11). The violation of the body of Christ is evoked in orgasmic terms – not only is he penetrated by the metal of the nails and the sword of

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<sup>87</sup> She wrote to John Gray that she must ‘wait, till you know whether you can open the door’ of the Catholic Church, fearing that she was ‘too wild for the Fold’ (Bradley cited in Thain 2007b: 175).

the male Centurions, but also, more lingeringly and probingly, by the gaze and imagination of the speaker. Again and again, the body of Christ is seen in such a violated, yet eroticised manner (much in the same way as the naked, mutilated Sebastians in *Sight and Song*). As mentioned in regard to *Poems of Adoration*, voicing covert homosexual desire through the body of Christ was commonplace for many male Catholic writers. In one of his sermons, Hopkins would rhapsodise at length over the physical beauty of Christ's actual body:

There met in Jesus Christ all things that can make a man lovely  
and loveable. In his body he was most beautiful. [...] I leave it to  
you [...] to picture him, in whom the fullness of the godhead  
dwelt bodily, in his bearing how majestic, how strong and yet how  
lovely and lissom in his limbs, in his look how earnest, grave but  
kind. [...] I look forward to seeing the matchless beauty of  
Christ's body in the heavenly light.

(Hopkins 1985: 137-9)

Love of Christ legitimates a love of his body, of the male form at its most perfect. Literally, as Roden states, 'Christ is the best lover' (Roden 2002: 104). There is barely latent within this desire for the bodily Christ a sadistic pleasure in his torture and death: 'In his Passion all this strength was spent, this lissomness crippled, this beauty wrecked, this majesty beaten down' (Hopkins 1985: 139). This damage is safely reversed by the Resurrection and Assumption, but at a purely textual level can also be endlessly re-imagined and revelled over. The same is true of Michael Field's writing: Christ is revered and desired for the nature of his sacrifice, but also, at the same time, for the opportunity that his dead body allows to express desire openly for the male form, for a vulnerable, passive masculinity. Marion Thain has rightly noted that Bradley and Cooper 'quite exceptionally among women, but not so unusually among the men with whom they associated, identify with Christ's suffering not as a form of powerlessness, but as a form of erotic transcendence' (Thain 2005: 322). Christ is the latest and last in a long line of physically desirable adolescent males which populate all of Michael Field's verse collections. Like them, he is vulnerable, violable, but sympathetic – or perhaps empathetic – in his suffering to femininity. As always with Michael Field, pure masculinity is not the central focus of desire alone; neither is the feminine, rather, it is both together, closely entwined. This is seen in the close unity of Christ and his Mother, but also in the liminal potential of Christ's body.

This is made potently apparent in a poem like 'A Crucifix':

Thee such loveliness adorns  
On Thy Cross, O my Desire –  
As a lily Thou art among thorns,  
As a rose lies back against his briar.

Thou art as a fair, green shoot,  
That along the wall doth run;  
Thou art as a welcoming open fruit,  
Stretched forth to the glory of the sun.  
(*MT*: 35, 1-8)

Christ on the cross is again seen in unquestionably feminine terms. Against the darkness and harshness of the cross he is a white lily – an image frequently used in connection with his Mother – a rose lying back against the cutting thorns of the briar which supports it. But the image of Christ's body as the lily is perhaps the most significant; Roden notes that throughout Christian art 'the lily has represented the Virgin Mary [...] It may be read as dandical excess [as well as] the Aesthete's queer appropriation of religious symbol' (Roden 2002: 85). In one stroke, Michael Field can be seen as queering Christ, not only using a symbol common among homosexual, dandified men, but by adopting a symbol used to denote Mary and female same-sex love. Christ is to an extent codified here as a lesbian signifier.

By the second stanza he is like a trailing plant, growing along the wooden frame of a trellis against a garden-wall. At the same time his wounded body is the fruit which it bears, opened and temptingly ripe for consumption. His body is appetising, perfumed and fecund with fertility. Michael Field's version of Christ, under the auspices of Bradley, bears more in common with a pagan god, such as Bacchus or Dionysus. As Cauti states, Michael Field's Christ is 'a vegetation god bursting into bloom; His suffering literally translates into nature and life' (Cauti 2007: 185). In the quick succession of flowering and fruiting images he is quite literally exploding with fertility. This is no dusty and distant Christian figure, but a protean physical force, temptingly ripe with a beauty which should be touched, enjoyed and tasted. Bradley's depictions of Christ add to Cooper's baroque elegance and effusiveness a sense of playfulness and revelling in the physical aspects of Catholic iconography which are at the same time so pagan in essence. Christ is a symbol of sacrifice, but also a site of beauty to be enjoyed for its own sake, as well as

representing the capacity to empathise with the plight of women, or to be compatible with desire for the feminine.

### ‘Cedar’

The poems which appear in ‘Cedar’ shift away from Christ and take the life of Mary as their central focus. However, Christ and Mary are so closely intertwined here within the mindset of Michael Field that discussion of one never wholly precludes discussion of the other. Yet what this section of poems creates, at the centre of the collection, is a prolonged hymn to the Holy Mother, praising through her the sanctity of the mother/lover dynamic, as well as more secular desires for feminine bodies.

‘She is One’ is perhaps the most striking poem of the latter type, evoking – as did Cooper’s ‘Pax Vobiscum’ – comparisons between Mary and Sappho:

High, lone above all creatures thou dost stand,  
Mary, as apple on the topmost bough,  
The gatherers overlooked, somehow –  
And yet not so:  
Man could not reach thee, thou so high dost grow  
Warm, gold for God’s own Hand.  
(*MT*: 51)

Bradley’s linking of Mary and Sappho is far more blatant than Cooper’s, quoting almost verbatim fragment 93 from the 1885 Wharton edition.<sup>88</sup> The sacred and the profane meet and mingle again in the image of the apple as the body of Mary. The apple is loaded with reference to temptation and Original Sin, but Mary herself is above all this, out of the reach of mortal fingers, though still remaining a focus of desire, almost tangibly present, all the more potent for her inaccessibility. In her stainless purity she is meant only for the hand of God, and the adoring eyes and hearts of humanity. Michael Field adds one word here which is not present in Wharton’s translation: ‘gold’. In this reference to the worth and beauty of Mary’s body as the ultimate object of female desire Bradley creates an echo which goes back to Cooper’s ‘Pax Vobiscum’ and her description of Mary as ‘more gold than gold’ (*PA*: 33, 8). In this way both sides of the Michael Field voice, in their authorial isolation, are

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<sup>88</sup> ‘As the sweet-apple blushes on the end of the bough, the very end of the bough, which the gatherers overlooked, nay overlooked not but could not reach’ (Wharton 1885: 119).

chiming in unison in expressing their desire towards the female body of Mary, through the proxy of Sappho's remaining poetry. By doing this, they shed light on the possibility of Mary being seen as a lesbian equivalent for channelling female homosexual desire much in the same way that her Son is for homosexual male Catholics.

Although 'She is One' is a faithful rendering of fragment 93, it is quietly innovative in the way that the blending of the body of Mary and the apple, as well as the religious and homosexual undertones, prefigure the Imagist works of Amy Lowell and H.D. (who would herself work from the Wharton translation of Sappho). John Gray would refer to this fragment in 'The Tree of Knowledge' from *Spiritual Poems* (1896) when claiming that Christ 'Sprang from its topmost bough / The hope at length, / Fearsome and fierce and passionate' (Gray 1896: vii). Olive Custance in 'Love's Firstfruits' from *Opals* (1897) quotes and reworks the entire fragment, but as a means of expressing more secular, romantic commonplaces: 'Autumn came / And with it came a Gatherer strong and bold / Who raised a longing hand to reach it down, / That little fruit of love – but it out-soared / That long lithe arm' (Custance 1897: 2, 13-17). Custance departs from the Sapphic original by having the apple shaken down from the tree at the end of the poem; this is a particular poetic licence which Gray and Michael Field would view as a violation of everything the fragment stands for. What neither writer matches is the sheer simplicity, the verbal pungency nor the eroticism of Michael Field's condensed poetics which will become a hallmark of female Imagism.

This condensed, highly visual proto-Imagist poetics is glimpsed again in the magnificent 'Stabat Mater',<sup>89</sup> Bradley's assertion of the close, intertwined relationship of Mary and the Godhead, of a mother and her son:

A great, nailed tree of Japonica,  
Red with the burnish that comes of blood –  
Very rich in flowering, spreading wide:  
And one beside that blows  
Tender bouquets of apple-bloom rose  
From the centre, or here and there . . .  
Our Lady! For I must think of her,  
    How thus she stood,  
Angel-soft, as she wound about,  
    In and out

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<sup>89</sup> 'The Mother Stood.'

Pale, mid the blood-red Wood.  
(*MT*: 73)

The speaker sees – perhaps in his/her own garden – a nailed tree of blooming Japonica, in blazing, burnished blood-red, at whose side flower the ‘Tender bouquets’ of apple-bloom rose, whose whiteness encircles and penetrates parts of the almost flaming bush. This image awakens within the mind of the speaker the plight of Mary, white against the bloodied body of her Son, as she circled and ‘wound about’ the blood red of the cross, in the same way that the apple-bloom climbs and encircles the trellis which the Japonica is nailed to. In a similar way to the apple-blossom, Bradley’s poems and images wind themselves around the fiery blooms of Cooper’s poetry. This poem provides a perfect symbol for Bradley’s own tentative attempt at an embracing of Cooper’s imagery, a reunion of the divergent voices of Michael Field.

The stark, contrasting images of the flowers – the blood red and the angel-soft white – instantly awaken in the speaker’s mind (and conjure in the imagination of the reader) a compact scene of Christ nailed to the cross, with his mother encircling him below. The poem is visually haunting, almost visceral, in its baroque metaphorical power, but also provides a soothing, nurturing depiction of Mary at the close. Here, both mother and Son are depicted as flowers, each twined around the other, providing an essential contrast and consolation to the other. They both appear, in this way, more complementarily feminine, more sisterly than their mother and son relationship would suggest. Furthermore, what strikes as being of significance in this poem is that the speaker sees, in a garden, an innocuous image of blooming flowers which to him/her seems charged with the essence of Christ’s Passion and the balm of Mary. Under Bradley’s auspices, Michael Field’s devotional lyrics transform domestic scenes and desires into representations of transcendence: religious desire does not lie within a separate intellectual sphere, but within the quotidian world, where it mingles with the sexual, the secular and the humbly domestic.

Bradley’s Mary is at one and the same time a focus of intense passion and desire, the apex of feminine purity and desirability, as well as the paragon of motherly love and suffering. There is one poem in particular, ‘Light of the Eyes’, which draws upon the grief of Mary and her divinity which harks to a particular tradition in English devotional poetry:



Blessèd are thine eyes – they see,  
Handmaid of the Trinity,  
Christ eternal in His rest,  
Laid a Babe upon thy breast.

Something in our sight doth lack!  
Thou dost see along the track.  
Bless, of thy fair Power, our sense  
To receive the Truth immense!

[....]

Blessèd eyes that watch Him die,  
Watching those that crucify;  
Weeping that they do not know  
How they murder, handling so.  
(*MT*: 74, 1-8 & 17-20)

This poem draws upon a rich Metaphysical tradition of depicting the weeping eyes of Mary Magdalene, as epitomised by the baroque lushness of Richard Crashaw: ‘Haile *Sister Springes*, / Parents of silver-forded rills! / Ever bubbling things! [...] I meane / Thy faire Eyes sweet *Magdalene*’ (Crashaw 1966, 79, 1-3 & 5-6).<sup>90</sup> In comparison to Crashaw’s ‘The Weeper’ and other similar pieces of the same period, Bradley’s poem is a masterstroke of simplicity in expression and diction. The eyes of Mary (here the Mother of Christ, not the Magdalene) are not eroticised, they are praised for their otherworldly capacity, their ability to see beyond the earthly plane. Mary here becomes comparable to another of Michael Field’s earlier Classical figures, Tiresias. Mary has the ability, as handmaid of the Trinity, to transcend space and time. She has become, after her Assumption, all-seeing, all-pitying: ‘From thy Vision may we prove / All the wanderings of the Dove!’ (*MT*: 74, 23-4). Tiresias, having been both male and female, gains insight after being deprived of optical vision; Mary gains her visionary capacity through her status as Mother of God and her transcendental suffering. In Bradley’s religious work as Michael Field, Mary is at once a mother, a domestic/human presence, and at the same time an elusive, though all-embracing, all-seeing force. For Hopkins she was an all-encompassing force of nature, ever-present and nourishingly fertile, like the air he breathed: ‘Wild air, world-mothering air, /

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<sup>90</sup> Another example of this genre appears in Andrew Marvell’s ‘Eyes and Tears’: ‘So Magdalen, in tears more wise / Dissolved those captivating eyes, / Whose liquid chains could flowing meet / To fetter her Redeemer’s feet’ (Marvell 2007: 52, 29-32). It is perhaps worth noting that the form of Marvell’s poem is replicated exactly in Bradley’s piece.

Nestling me everywhere, / That each eyelash or hair / Girdles' (Hopkins 1967: 93, 1-4). Ruth Vanita observes that Michael Field's Madonnas 'are noticeably different from Gerard Manley Hopkins's poems to Mary, which celebrate her as the principle of fertility' (Vanita 1996: 134). For Bradley, Mary's essential quality was always her feminine capacity for desire – both fleshly and Divine – and for compassion.

### 'Sword'

The closing section of *Mystic Trees* contains a number of poems which deal with increasingly personal matters. These relate mainly to Bradley's own ambiguous, fluctuating religious and spiritual allegiances, and, more and more, her emotional turmoil at seeing Cooper gradually succumb to cancer. But before she moves to more sombre contemplations, she manages to create an arresting piece, 'Before Requiem', which revels in both natural imagery and the physical paraphernalia of religious practice:

Bees from loveliest fields of light,  
Make our darksome candles bright!  
From the balsam beds ye come  
To build glory round the tomb.

Angels from the summer ye,  
Angels to our Mystery,  
That these golden rods, that stand  
Sentry to our dead, have planned!  
(MT: 93, 1-8)

It is the wild bees from the fields which create the wax of the paschal candle. In former Michael Field collections bees have been very powerful images of sexual ambiguity and energy, a recurring erotic signifier. Here, they have become little 'Angels', creating from the blooms of summer the 'golden rods' of light which will illuminate Catholic ceremonies of the dead. Pagan and Catholic rituals meet and coalesce through the image of the bees who have created what Marion Thain has called 'a light sacred both in Christian liturgy and pagan symbolism' (Thain 2007b: 175). The bees, as both pleasure-loving, pleasure-giving insects and divine 'Angels' act as 'mediators between the earthly and the heavenly' (Thain 2007b: 175): 'Work us wax so fine, its flame / Be of God's the very name' (MT: 93, 11-12). Lingering

pagan allegiances and the new religious order are here completely complementary and interchangeable. This poem is reminiscent of the letter which Bradley wrote to John Gray shortly before her conversion, expressing her still essentially pagan approach to Catholicism: ‘I love all that is pagan in the Church so dearly. I love the Paschal Candle with a great hugging love. I want to [?]sing the bees who make the wax. I love all about the lights. [...] Is it that once I was a torch-bearer on the hills?’ (Bradley in Thain 2007b: 175). The poem takes these spiritual ambiguities and resolves them in what is a veritable hymn to the synthesis of belief and nature. Below the high religiosity of Bradley’s verse as Michael Field constantly run the Old World passions and emotions; it is the resultant intensity of feeling, the joy in worship of whatever creed, which makes Bradley’s late poetry often so refreshing and accessible.

There are further poems in ‘Sward’ which demonstrate this same blending of the sacred and the profane, but as the collection moves to its close the most striking theme is the one of grief for Cooper’s suffering in the later stages of her fatal illness. They depict a growing sense of futility in the face of imminent parting, as in the haunting ‘Caput Tuum Ut Carmelus’<sup>91</sup>:

I watch the arch of her head,  
As she turns away from me . . .  
I would I were with the dead,  
Drowned with the dead at sea,  
All the waves rocking over me!

As St. Peter turned and fled  
From the Lord, because of sin,  
I look on that lovely head;  
And its majesty doth win  
Grief in my heart as for sin.

(MT: 146, 1-10)

The grief expressed here is all-encompassing. The lingering love of the elder for the younger woman, kindled by her decline which throws her beauty into ever finer relief, is indeed a sin. But the greatest sin here, in the mind of the speaker, is that the beloved must suffer and die. The final stanza offers up a question, destined to go unanswered: ‘Oh, what can death have to do / With a curve that is drawn so fine, / With a curve that is drawn as true, / As the mountain’s crescent line? . . . / Let me be hid where the dust falls fine!’ (MT: 146, 11-15). The poem closes with a death-wish.

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<sup>91</sup> ‘Your Head is Like a Beautiful Hill’ (Mount Carmel).

There can be no answer in the end from religion; the only consolation for such a loss is to die too. Right at the end of the collection, it is as though Bradley is testing in her poetry the validity of religious belief against the harsh realities of life and death, and finding it wanting. It should be also be noted that the head of the beloved, lying on its side in bed, recalls the image of the disembodied head of Salomé from Cooper's *Poems of Adoration*. This is a clear case of Bradley taking an image from Cooper's poetry and then transforming it, making it more personal and domestic, transforming the mystical nightmare vision of 'A Dance of Death' into a gentle, heartfelt complaint; if not a dance of death, then it is a small tableau of grief at impending death and dissolution of beauty.

What the closing poems about Cooper revive is the poetic courtship poetry of The Third Book from *Underneath the Bough*, where both motherly and romantic emotions combine. At the close of *Mystic Trees*, Bradley's speakers again take on the role of mother/lover in addressing the ailing Cooper, but the tone is one of unavailing sorrow. As Emma Donoghue states, these late poems about Cooper 'can be read in the tradition of the late Victorian obsession with the beautiful dying woman, but they stand out because of their urgently autobiographical tone and emphasis on unglamorous pain' (Donoghue 1998: 137). Bradley has, in effect, taken on the poetic mantle of the Virgin Mary, lamenting her child with the remaining Sapphic connection, the passion for 'a curve that is drawn so fine' only serving to heighten her pain.

While Cooper and Bradley's collections of devotional verse are similar in the themes and tropes that they adopt and explore, there are distinct differences between *Poems of Adoration* and Bradley's *Mystic Trees*. Bradley's work is deeply concerned with matters of doctrine and Biblical scenarios, but in a way that is less intense and more accessible than Cooper's. Charles Ricketts strikes what is perhaps the most appropriate note of comparison when he writes to Bradley on 9 April 1906:

Several [of the poems] are closed to me owing to temper or subject matter. This was the case with *Poems of Adoration*, where the religious spirit is far more constant and very inward. In Henry's book, the texture is often of a fine quality. There are countless beautiful lines and beautiful thoughts, but to the layman there is a sense of length and over-tenseness. You are much more with the Naughty Virgins who ran after cuckoos and red currants.

(Ricketts 1981: 30)

Although Cooper's work may be 'beautiful', even 'fine' in parts, on the whole it excludes the general reader, 'the layman'. It may have been read by priests and nuns, but it cannot communicate its central message to everyone. Bradley has a greater chance of this, Ricketts hints, because of the connection which has been retained with her pagan roots. A sense of pleasure, of poetic playfulness in the face of serious piety makes Bradley's religious lyrics so appealing to a 'layman'. Ricketts' judgement is accurate, but that is not to lay the charge that Bradley was in any way a religious hypocrite, or only half-earnest in her views. Her ability to sing God's praises, as openly, probingly and ambiguously as in her youth only strengthens her work and her sense of piety. Lionel Johnson had written that Sacred Poets:

[...] must feel towards the contents of their creed as lovers  
towards the separate and single beauties of their mistresses: a  
personal devotion to each precious detail, with a comprehension of  
their place and office in the gracious whole. There must be a  
reverent familiarity, no less than an awed veiling of the eyes. For  
this poetry abhors generalities [...] and [will] not be afraid to face  
the details of divine history.

(Johnson 1911: 113)

Furthermore, they must not fear to be God's 'carollers and gay minstrels' (Johnson 1911: 116), as any failure to do so would result in a dry piety which only 'paralyses their poetic wits; a dry formality of phrase besets them, a kind of consecrated commonplace' (Johnson 1911: 118). In order to communicate desire for the Godhead it is important, Johnson suggests, for the poet to employ a more natural, secular means of communicating desire so that it sounds genuine, therefore spreading its message to a greater audience. Cooper's poetry, because it is so internalised, does veer at times to a kind of 'consecrated commonplace', while Bradley becomes increasingly autobiographical. Her very use of vocabulary and simple, almost comedic rhymes – 'My God, in penance I would pant, / As the devoted Elephant' (*MT*: 128, 10-11) – suits the homely devotional lyricism of her themes. In this sense, she – and by the same token, Michael Field – should be seen in the tradition of the English domestic visionary, stretching from Margery Kempe<sup>92</sup> to Christina Rossetti.

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<sup>92</sup> Catholic art and domesticity in English culture have gone hand-in-hand since the Reformation, when Catholics were forced to worship in secrecy. Catholic poets and musicians, such as William Byrd (between 1534 and 1543 – 1623), composed their works to be shared in secret and performed in the home. Bradley and Cooper, living in more open times, keep their religion and their art separate from

Even at the end of her life, when suffering great grief and the onset of her own cancer, Bradley is not past her prime as a writer – she is still performing at the height of her capabilities, even though she has adopted a new religious belief system. She manages to retain flashes of the brilliant past while still finding much of value and beauty in the Catholic lumber-room of relics, imagery and rituals.

*Poems of Adoration* and *Mystic Trees* are individual works which perform well on their own, but function much better when considered together, as a whole. In this way, the two halves of the Michael Field voice are joined, and the two books with their different voices become as one. These were the last two books which the two writers saw into print together, in that sense they are the last true works of ‘Michael Field’. What they effectively manage to do is to draw upon all of the images which have been central to the poetic oeuvre in the past and to bring them to some form of harmonious conclusion. The struggle between masculinity and femininity is resolved in the relationship of Jesus Christ and the Virgin Mary; the role of the mother/lover also finds a sympathetic analogue in Mary, and a parallel once again in the forms of Bradley and Cooper themselves; even the imagery of the bees has now become an intermediary between the pleasure of the terrestrial world and Heaven. The Michael Field poetic oeuvre has almost been brought full-circle, with all its tensions laid to rest. The completion of this circle would be the task of Bradley’s last few months alive, and the impetus behind her final attempts to reunite the two halves of Michael Field.

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wider culture, in the home, almost as a means of protecting its purity from the more superficial aspects of religious fashions prevalent at the *fin de siècle*.

## **Conclusion: Closing the Circle**

Edith Cooper's death on 13 December 1913 left Bradley feeling totally bereft. Between this time and her own death just over nine months later in September 1914 Bradley would set to work and edit and publish two further poetry collections under the Michael Field name. Although the preceding two devotional books had effectively brought the poetic oeuvre to a form of harmonious closure – particularly regarding the resolution of the long-standing struggle between masculine and feminine forces – the final two works which Bradley placed in the public domain in 1914 would end the oeuvre on a flourish, and very much on her own terms by going back full-circle to the oeuvre's classical, pagan origins.

The two resulting works are *Whym Chow: Flame of Love* (1914) and *Dedicated* (1914). The former comprises the poems written by both Bradley and Cooper in the wake of their dog's death in 1906. The latter is made up of poems solely by Cooper from her formative stages as a writer as well as pieces written in the mid to late nineties; the sole exception is the final poem, 'Fellowship' which was written by Bradley. In creating both of these volumes, Bradley was delving back into Michael Field's past in order to find what she saw as a fitting conclusion to the career. It was to be an ending which utilised both the united collaborative voice, as well as the resurrected, single voice of Cooper. These two works, in their quite different ways, are concerned with past settings – both domestic, classical/pastoral scenes – which are lost and only accessible through the memory. If *Mystic Trees* shows Bradley's occasional attempts at winding her own separate poetic voice around Cooper's, then her editing of these last two works is an extension of this enterprise: remembering the lost moments, giving voice to the dead, and re-forming and touching the intangible through the power of the poetic imagination.

On 27 January 1914 Bradley wrote in her journal:

I have been preparing the Chow Book [...] How we loved one another then – in 1906! – the year before we entered the Catholic Church – Out with Thy tablets, Truth: we have never loved each other since, as then [...] How you loved me little Hennie, in Chow! [...] Show me how you love me now. – We have loved so that all men have marvelled; & yet – the Church severed us....<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Field, Michael, BL. Add. MS. 46804A, 1914, *fols.* 7r – 8v

The journal, once a record of the triumphs and tribulations – both small and large – of each day has now become a means of communication, of intimate conversation, with the dead, the now voiceless. The Catholicism which gave Cooper so much spiritual assurance and strength throughout her long illness is now a source of considerable regret to Bradley. Although they had continued in their companionship and their literary career following the joint 1907 conversions, something was irredeemably lost in the transition, the ‘way we loved one another then’ in the pagan days. Though the Church ‘severed’ them in life, the unearthing of the Chow poems after Cooper’s death allows the love they shared ‘in Chow’ in 1906 to be openly expressed. Loving each other ‘in Chow’, as they later loved ‘in Christ’, these poems, as selected and arranged by Bradley, heighten the passionate grief and longing for the dog and the absent loved one to arresting spiritual, emotional and erotic extremes.

The collection was published privately by the Eragny Press in the spring of 1914, in an extremely limited run of only 27 copies. The thirty poems which comprise this slim, exquisitely designed volume do not form a cohesive narrative sequence. Rather, they comprise a series of intense episodes, highly crafted baroque effusions on loss and bereavement. There are many examples of the baroque and artificial touches which would later be present in the poetry of *Poems of Adoration* and *Mystic Trees*, but to an extent that neither of these books exhibit. It is as though through writing these poems to the Chow, Bradley and Cooper were exorcising not only their grief but also a highly decadent formalism which would tinge their later poetry, but not overburden it. It is interesting that Bradley would chose to end the career of Michael Field on this highly private and poetically effusive note.

In ‘VII’ the speaker declares ‘It is so old and deep a thing / The being fond of animals’ (WC: 18, 1-2). If the subject matter of the volume, the commemoration of a dead domestic pet, strikes the reader as being somewhat odd, even comical – which at times in the hands of Michael Field it undoubtedly is – then it is worth remembering that the praise of domestic pets, living and dead (but particularly dogs) was something of a tradition in the literature of the nineteenth century from the Romantics to the late Victorians. Lord Byron, in his ‘Inscription on the Monument of a Newfoundland Dog’, created an epitaph to his dead dog Boatswain and declares in the final couplet: ‘To mark a friend’s remains these stones arise; / I never knew but one, – and here he lies’ (Byron 1970: 54, 25-6). This spare close is full of passionate



integrity and is touching without excessive sentiment. The dog, though not human, was the speaker's truest, only friend. Indeed, as the whole poem shows, the fact that the dog was *not* human is exactly the reason why he was able to be a true friend. Lying behind the lament of this epitaph – owing much to the tradition of Thomas Gray and his 'storied urns' (Byron 1970 54: 4) – Byron's real focus is an attack on the degraded animalism of humanity: 'By nature vile, ennobled but by name, / Each kindred brute might bid thee blush for shame' (Byron 1970: 54, 21-2) whereas the 'poor dog' is 'the firmest friend, / The first to welcome, foremost to defend' (Byron 1970: 54, 7-8). His chief worth in life was the friendship and protection he gave; in death it is the pure emotions he awakens in the heart of one member of the degenerate human race.

'Pet was never loved as you', declared Thomas Hardy, 'Purer of the spotless hue' (Hardy 2001: 657, 1-2) in his 'Last Words to a Dumb Friend'. Like Byron, what made this pet exceptional was his gentle companionship, his mute acceptance of his lot, and his mild joy in his master's company. But what sets this poem apart from Byron's is the depth of the feeling expressed for the absent pet; it is much quieter and contemplative in tone, but intensely moving in its slow accumulation of suffering which is heightened by small traces of the dog's physical presence which still linger about the house and the garden: 'From the chair wheron he sat / Sweep his fur, nor wince thereat; / Rake his little pathways out / Mid the bushes roundabout' (Hardy 2001: 657, 22-5). Although this is clearly a poem about a dead domestic pet, the grief expressed by the speaker could be for a lost human companion. However, in this house still 'all redolent of him' (Hardy 2001: 658, 50), where the dog can still be imagined running to the window-sill, the speaker looks out and his eye is caught by 'Your small mound beneath the tree, / Showing in the autumn shade / That you moulder where you played' (Hardy 2001: 658, 54-6). Underlying everything the dog represented in life and now in memory is the inexorable severance, indignity and morbidity of death.

These elements of the dog as the firmest friend, and the cruel, unavoidable reality of the physical removal of death are all hallmarks of Michael Field's poems to the dead Whym Chow. But there is also something more – an element of the dog's mystical otherness – which has antecedents in Romantic and early Victorian women's writing. Caroline Bowles, in her 1822 poem *Conte a Mon Chien*, would have her speaker declare: 'Aye, let them laugh, who understand / No utterance save

of human speech – / We have a language at command / They cannot feel, we cannot teach’ (Bowles 1822: 125, 5-8). There is here the suggestion of a special connection between the woman and the dog, a kinship between the feminine and the animalistic, a sort of mystical otherness which the woman poet shares in connection with the natural landscape and the creatures which inhabit it. Outsiders, particularly men, may scoff and deride a relationship and a language – so ostensibly trivial and domestic – to which they have no understanding or access.

One of the most famous and intriguing poetic invocations of a domestic dog is Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s ‘Flush or Faunus’. Here, for Barrett Browning’s speaker, blinded by an unnamed grief, the small hairy face which wiped her tears away was like some ‘goatly God in twilight grove’ (Barrett Browning 1995: 375, 10). In actuality, it was her own spaniel Flush, who left her ‘thanking the true PAN, / Who, by low creatures, leads to heights of love’ (Barrett Browning 1995: 375, 13-14). If only for a moment the dog has been the embodiment of the old pagan gods made flesh, a connection with a classical past which is liberating, regenerative, and full of vision for the earthbound, grieving poet, shackled to her couch. In these diverse poems, the figure of the domestic dog emerges as a legitimate focus for grief and strong human emotions, a marker by which to measure humanity, as well as a shifting, mysterious transformative force which potentially liberates the spiritual and emotional shackles of the creative mind. It is this diverse, impassioned tradition – an underground school of canine elegy – from which Michael Field’s Chow collection emerges, and which it completely subverts.

At the outset of *Whym Chow*, the Chow is seen in spiritual/religious terms. Poems ‘III’ and ‘IV’ deal with the burial of the dog’s physical remains and his role as a spiritual symbol, a metaphor of sacrifice, is clear from the start. As Whym Chow lay in his coffin, Cooper had recorded simply in the journal: ‘He lies rigid and very beautiful – quite glad now to be still – feeling as in a casket all his Royal love for me [...] the glorious little frame is a tomb of his passion.’<sup>94</sup> In ‘III’ this moment would be elevated to epiphanic heights:

Crowned with wine-steeped Daphne-bough,  
Strewment of the black,  
Sproutless ivy in thy frenzy trod,  
Wine-steeped hellebore

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<sup>94</sup> Field, Michael, BL. Add. MS. 46795, 1906, fol. 17v

'Neath thy ebon chin,  
 Thy bright corse walled in  
 On thy coffin-floor;  
 And the wine of God  
 Making ruddy track  
 On thy side, thy blood upon thy brow!  
 (WC: 12, 1-10)

Laid out for burial, the dog is crowned and strewn with branches and cuttings, small pagan offerings which mark his status as their Bacchic cub, but also, like Daphne, his metamorphic powers. Now dead, he is transformed from the physical to the spiritual plane. Furthermore, amongst all the pagan paraphernalia, he is noted as being marked on his brow and his side with the 'wine of God'. This household pagan god, in death, comes more and more to resemble the dead Christ. This is the moment within the mind of Bradley and Cooper and the poetry of Michael Field that religious allegiances and desires begin a tectonic shift. This is made more explicit in the following poem, 'IV':

O Dionysus, at thy feet  
 The beauteous reveller, our joy, we lay –  
 Our Bacchic Cub, the dear tamed animal,  
 So often touched with ivy-coronal,  
 Who, breathing day  
 As from mountain, found thy worship sweet.

O god, o vine, on his dead side  
 Stain thy grape: above his corse we drink  
 In sacrament to thy divinest folly  
 That made all creatures of bright revel holy,  
 Chose them to link  
 With god and maenads in one rapture wide.  
 (WC: 14, 1-12)

The dead dog is both Bacchus and Christ. The practice of Bacchic and Christian ritual, the taking of sacramental wine – which is concurrently Dionysian juice from the vine as well as the blood of Christ – is remarkably similar and compatible in this light. Though the death of the dog will eventually usher in a new spiritual and aesthetic world order, there will always – as has been seen in the two devotional collections – be echoes from the old pagan days. Christ and the Chow open up a doorway to a new future of religious order and fulfilment, but also, as Bradley's publication of the poems demonstrates, this doorway allows a chance to go back and

celebrate the freedoms of the past, and to find a language of desire through the dog which allows a dialogue between the speaker(s) and God, as well as between each other. This is seen to great effect in ‘Trinity’:

I did not love him for myself alone:  
I loved him that he loved my dearest love.  
O God, no blasphemy  
It is to feel we loved in trinity,  
To tell Thee that I loved him as Thy Dove  
Is loved, and is Thy own,  
That comforted the moan  
Of Thy beloved, when earth could give no balm  
And in Thy Presence makes His tenderest calm.  
(WC: 15, 1-9)

The speaker, after addressing Dionysus, feels the need to address God directly, firmly justifying the existence and function of their own ostensibly blasphemous trinity between two lovers and their dog. The creature which formed an essential animalistic element of a domestic pagan trinity has now become a factor in a more celestial trinity: through his death he has led them to Christ. Loving him and loving through him was – and still is, after his death – like loving, and loving through, the proxy of Christ. In his death Whym Chow becomes the ‘symbol of our perfect union, strange / Unconscious Bearer of Love’s interchange’ (WC: 15, 17-18). The chow is Bradley and Cooper’s own little Holy Ghost. Their domestic trinity, they feel, is not blasphemous because it mirrors the Holy Trinity, facilitating greater direct connection with the Godhead. Also, – perhaps more importantly – he is the point of interchange for the terrestrial love between Bradley and Cooper. Marion Thain has rightly noted that here Bradley and Cooper ‘seem to be reconciling their perfect erotic union with their Catholic faith [...] the dog manages precisely to belong to both worlds’ (Thain 2007b: 189-90). If Catholicism divided them in the flesh, in death the dog remained their means of retaining both romantic and spiritual connection. He was the mediator, the proxy through which their union, emotional, literary – and perhaps sexual – could be kept alive, as becomes evident in the extraordinary fantasia of poem ‘XXIV’:

Pillow, turf, nor sand, nor breast  
As confessional I sought:  
Nay, but down my face was pressed  
In thy wondrous fur, enwrought

Of the gilded motes of sun,  
And the tongues of ruddy fire,  
And the wool that Jason won  
When – his utmost of desire –  
He had raped his Golden Fleece:  
There I hid my joys and woes,  
There my solitude would cease,  
There my thoughts their travel close.

Dearer would that fur beguile  
Than the pillow's tenderest fold;  
Deeper than the turf its pile,  
Warmer and more manifold  
In its lulling magic spell  
Than the seashore's golden hum;  
Sweeter of its yielded balm,  
Yea, even sweeter than to come  
To a human breast for calm,  
Since no breast could have such sole  
Comfort of itself to yield,  
No such absolution whole –  
Sorrow buried, joy revealed.

(WC: 49, 49-73)

The body of the dog, his 'wondrous fur', was a 'confessional', the place where the speaker pressed her face and uttered their most intimate fears and desires and would find absolute calm. Not sleep, the earth, the sea, or a human breast could offer such 'sole comfort' where such a joy could be 'revealed'. But the dog was and remains in this light a means of erotic connection with the beloved. Running through this description is a covert language of sexual desire, with 'tongues of ruddy fire', golden humming, sweet yielded balms and physical warmth. The speaker's 'confessional' to the dog, the burying of the face in the fur, becomes suggestive of sexual connection between two women, a coded, punning reference to cunnilingus. Though the dog is now dead and the moral strictures of Catholicism beckon, by re-imagining the dog poetically in this manner, as David Banash has commented, Bradley and Cooper 'reinvent and enact their passion through the mediating body of their beloved pet dog' (Banash 2005: 196). Michael Field again just barely skirts the boundaries of decency, outrageously and joyfully blaspheming that the Chow dog was not only a means of Confession, of gaining spiritual absolution, but is now, in the imagination, a means of sexual absolution and fulfilment with the other remaining member of the earthly trinity.

It is the half-serious, half hidden and self-conscious campness of these verses, their transcending of all acceptable boundaries of decency which remains their greatest appeal and such a fitting ending to the narrative and aesthetic arc of the Michael Field poetic oeuvre. The style of the poems in *Whym Chow* is often ornate, highly wrought and artificial to a degree not seen before in the other collections. In ‘Out of the East’ the dog is evoked in terms redolent of decadent aestheticism ‘Jasper and jacinth, amber and fine gold, / The topaz, ruby, the fire-opal, grey / And lucent agate covered thee with glory’ (WC: 20, 1-3). The dog is here a jewelled object of consumption, a fine object to possess and marvel over, akin in this sense to the gem-encrusted tortoise of Des Essentes in Huysmans’s *A Rebours* (1884). The grief of Bradley and Cooper was truly of oriental proportions and clearly pushed them to extremes of formal expression where their vocabulary for expressing their unique loss and desires was strained to the limits. Yet there does remain a conversation between these poems, the new phase that they herald, and the past writing: ‘Movements of thy form re-curved, / On a sigh, a pearl in seas / Shut down dark in mysteries’ (WC: 42, 6-8). This recalls ‘A Girl’ from *Underneath the Bough*, ‘Onycha’ in *Wild Honey*, and looks forward to the depiction of Christ in ‘Nimis honorati Sunt’ which appeared in Cooper’s *Poems of Adoration* in 1912.

In 1906, these poems marked a moment of transition for Bradley and Cooper. Many of the extreme elements of their bereavement and their formal style had been tamed by the time *Poems of Adoration* and *Mystic Trees* were written and published. *Whym Chow*, the little fluid flame of love which courses through this small collection was a flame which cleared the way for the conciliatory, resolving nature of the devotional collections. Though the Chow poems are very unorthodox in their religious and sexual desires – and very curious overall – from the dying Bradley’s point of view they provide the perfect note to end the oeuvre of Michael Field. The collection is highly intimate, deeply autobiographical and domestic amidst all the opulence of diction. The figure of the dog – perhaps more so than Christ and his mother – is the all-encompassing symbol of manifold desire: he is Bacchus and Dionysus, Christ, Muse, spiritual guardian and mediator of passionate love between two women, separated by age, Catholicism, and then finally by death.

But Bradley could not leave things here: she had to have one final word as Michael Field. In the summer of 1914 she published *Dedicated*, a collection of the poems which Cooper composed on her own at various stages in her life. They are not

dated in the book, but through the Treby catalogue it is possible to see that they are an amalgam of juvenilia as well as poems composed in the 1890s (Treby 1998: 144-212). As a whole, they all deal with classical themes and figures. Their chief worth is, perhaps, in gaining further insight into the quality of Cooper's own poetic abilities. They are, almost without exception, overly verbose and tending more to the narrative and dramatic as opposed to the lyric. For instance, here is the opening of 'The Ritual of Earth':

Once in Aegira, on its headlong hills,  
That Crathis girds with billow fed by Styx,  
That ocean worships from the port – yea, fills  
With brine the air that tops their summits, licks  
Their sudden old declivities – of yore  
The earth had there a temple and there spoke  
Her prophesies that breathed in her before  
Another shape had origin or woke  
From out all-powerful Chaos, cold and stark.  
(PA: 57, 1-9)

Rather than encapsulating and exhibiting intense moments of personal vision, these poems are more impersonal tales, assimilated mythic lore. There are moments of success, but, as the above quoted poem shows, none of the pieces strike the characteristic Michael Field poetic register. Curiously, it would be Catholicism which sharpened and focused Cooper's lyric capacity. Right at the close of *Poems of Adoration*, however, is a piece written by Bradley in March 1914, entitled 'Fellowship':

In the old accents I will sing, my Glory, my Delight,  
In the old accents, tipped with flame, before we knew the right,  
True way of singing with reserve. O Love, with pagan might,

White in our steeds, and white too in our armour let us ride,  
Immortal, white, triumphing, flashing downward side by side,  
To where our friends, the Argonauts, are fighting with the tide.

Let us draw calm to them Beloved, the souls on heavenly voyage bound,  
Saluting as one presence. Great disaster were it found,  
If one with half-fed lambency should halt and flicker round.

O friends, so fondly loving, so beloved, look up to us,  
In constellation breaking on your errand, prosperous,  
O Argonauts!

Now, faded from their sight,  
We cling and joy. It was thy intercession gave me right  
My Fellow, to this fellowship. My Glory, my Delight!  
(D: 123-4)

The speaker declares his/her abandonment of the new 'True way of singing with reserve' in favour of the glorious, flame-tipped 'old accents'. 'Fellowship' as Thain has noted, continues the classical themes of Cooper's poems, but adds 'a personal conceit which softens the abstraction of its style' (Thain 2007b: 129). Bradley is reclaiming and asserting the old pagan pleasures and energies which formed and informed the older poetry of Michael Field, as well as her private life with Cooper. This poem, in its assertion of an alliance forged between two heroic, pagan singers, voyaging and 'drawing calm' to the like-minded 'souls on heavenly voyage bound' recalls the earlier sentiments of 'It was deep April': 'To laugh and dream on Lethe's shore, / To sing to Charon in his boat, / Heartening the timid souls afloat (*UTBa*: 79, 7-9). What Bradley manages in 'Fellowship' – with its strident, affirmative, almost militaristic rhythm and tempo – is to create a second anthem of Michael Field's unity and purpose in singing of the natural, unfettered energies of existence; in one poem she effectively takes Michael Field back to the glory days of the late eighties and the early nineties, united in voice and vision. Bradley, like Cooper, died in the Catholic faith; she never officially renounced her religion. As Leighton has noted, like many other female poets of the period 'Their subconscious [...] remained essentially pagan' (Leighton 1992: 225). But 'Michael Field' does revert, signalling Bradley's regret at the effects orthodox faith had put upon the unity and style of Michael Field's poetry and inner psychic life. With Cooper gone, Bradley can make sure that the last words of Michael Field's are full of pagan platitudes, utilising Cooper's own abandoned, unpublished manuscripts, coupled with her own, final poetic utterance.

Bradley's actions in editing and publishing the final two collections of Michael Field's verse put the final twist, the last act of the old faith, upon a corpus of poetry which from first to last had been concerned with the dynamics of multiple collaborative voices, aestheticism and manifold desires and the ways in which they could be presented and explored through the body of the texts. In the case of collaboration, the poetic oeuvre of Michael Field bears constant witness to the fluctuations, the highs and the lows, of Bradley and Cooper's poetic partnership. The early lyrics of 'Arran and Isla Leigh' and Michael Field's first collections *Long Ago*



and *Sight and Song* exhibit a unity of voice and vision which is arresting, and belies the fact that often many of the lyrics, spoken in one voice, are the work of two authors. It is only in *Underneath the Bough* that we begin to sense a tension as the voices become separated, fractured, and multiple. And yet this becomes the central thematic focus of the work, with many of the poems of the Third Book presenting the voice of a female poet teasing, tempting back the coquettish, younger female writer. It is this slight tension between the voices which occurs again in *Wild Honey* which provides the dramatic impetus for many of the great love poems which occur there. The two devotional collections *Poems of Adoration* and *Mystic Trees* show the complete division of the collaborative process and the collapse of the single, unified Michael Field voice which Catholicism brought about. But even then, this break in the collaboration yet again became a thematic concern of the verse as a few of the poems in Bradley's collection pick up echoes of Cooper's. Ending with *Whym Chow: Flame of Love* and *Dedicated*, Bradley was able to pay homage to Cooper's individualism, while also presenting the Chow poems of 1906 which were perhaps the last pure flowering of their collaborative writing.

It is possible in some cases to identify specific poems as being by one or the other woman. It is even possible to draw some conclusions as to the individual qualities of each woman's poetic style – Bradley being the more adept at the shorter, intimate lyric, with Cooper leaning more to the dramatic – but not to any great degree of certainty or accuracy. The most important aspect of the Michael Field collaboration is the way that its vicissitudes affect the changing shape, style and subject matter of the poems and the individual collections in which they appeared. It is one of the overriding narratives of the entire oeuvre. The personal and artistic complications which brought joint lyric composition to a halt for most of the nineties are ultimately resolved only to then be completely undone by Catholicism. Bradley's final action as Michael Field reinstates the pure collaborative voice, harking back to the past, and bringing the long aesthetic journey of the two separate voices to a harmonious resolution.

As regards Aestheticism and the treatment of aesthetic tropes, the lyric poetry of Michael Field presents one of the most significant, accomplished and sustained examples of female engagement with what has commonly been seen as an exclusively male preserve. Leighton has commented that 'The problem which pervades aestheticism is the problem [...] of masculinity [...] largely concerned

with itself' (Leighton 1995: 33). Leighton's comment is certainly true but does not give a deeper picture of women's presence in, and engagement with, the wider aspects of aesthetic thought and practice. Talia Schaffer and Kathy Alexis Psomiades on the other hand have written that 'women's participation in aestheticism was widespread, significant, and controversial [...] recognizing this participation will reshape our views of both aestheticism and the history of women's writing' (Schaffer and Psomiades 1999: 1). And it is Michael Field's poetry, as I have shown, which goes some significant distance in demonstrating the extent and success of this long overlooked participation. Almost each separate volume of verse engages with at least one significant aspect of aesthetic thought, whether it is about the relation between the present and the past, the representation of the visual arts in a verbal medium, or the expression of romantic, sexual or spiritual desires. Michael Field's canvas is, in this light, very broad and inclusive: there were clearly very few avenues of aestheticism which Bradley and Cooper felt that, as women, they could not explore and experiment with as Michael Field. Throughout their lives and their works, their central concern remained with art, with the importance of aesthetic connection and expression where the essential questions of human passions and desires could be mapped out away from the intrusion of external social and political concerns.

Indeed, it is the lack of any consistent interest or connection with overtly political and social causes – though there are traces in *The New Minnesinger* and 'For That Moment Only' – which sets the work of Michael Field aside from that of most other female poets of the time, and places Bradley and Cooper safely in the category of pure Aesthetes as opposed to being, say, New Women. The study of New Woman writing at the turn of the last century is widespread and has tended to obscure the presence of women within aestheticism – particularly as aesthetic poets – as Schaffer and Psomiades note: 'Female aesthetes will continue to fall through the cracks of a New Woman criticism that requires evidence of political enthusiasm – and this is precisely how it should be' (Schaffer and Psomiades 1999: 15). This is a very interesting point: while New Women criticism, with a focus upon feminist and political activism, may allow aesthetes like Bradley and Cooper to fall out of focus because of their lack of engagement with these causes, it should not be forgotten that Michael Field's engagement with aestheticism and its tradition is, in its way, a highly political engagement. At every stage and at all levels the interest of Michael Field lies in the complex power struggles over the presentation of the female and male form for

the consumption and pleasure of the reading or viewing audience – the wonderful subversiveness of this lies in the way that the traditional lines are constantly blurred: women are offered as much for the pleasure of other women as they are for men; the young male body can have as much appeal in art for a heterosexual female as it can for a homosexual man. This is all further complicated by the ever fluctuating ambiguity between male and female utterance: is it Michael Field speaking, or two spinsters? Bradley and Cooper's engagement with aestheticism plays with assumptions, offering radical new possibilities. And yet, although Bradley and Cooper were not in any sense New Women, there are occasionally, as I have demonstrated, gentle echoes of New Woman conventions and texts.

A consideration of Michael Field's aesthetic credentials must inevitably lead to the question of the extent to which Michael Field's poetry was decadent. When reading the poetry alongside the key male decadents of the *fin de siècle* it is clear to see that in comparison it displays little or no ennui, no glee in moral depravity or any overt sense of sin. Few, if any, of the words which Lisa Rodensky has used to define decadence – 'Lurid, languid, perverse, amoral, immoral, impressionistic, diseased, world-weary, soul-sick [...] intensely artificial' (Rodensky 2006: xxiv) – apply to the poems of Michael Field. There is also little or no connection with contemporary cityscapes or urban settings. Likewise, there is no sense of what R. K. R. Thornton has termed 'the effete casualness, the languid withdrawal' of decadence (Thornton 1979: 28). Angela Leighton has raised the point that when they lived a decadent lifestyle – when they were practising pagans and lovers – then their poetry was at its least decadent in tone and style. When they converted and repudiated their past life, strangely, their writing took on the formal decadence they had shunned in the past (Leighton 1992: 223). This is an attractive reading and is, more or less, true. However, the extreme baroque style and subject matter of *Whym Chow*, which ends the oeuvre, can be seen as a passing phase, something unique to the first wave of grief in 1906. Although the later devotional lyrics are more baroque and artificial than the work from the past, they are – particularly in the case of Bradley's late poetry, still vibrantly coloured, exuberant, and inventive pieces. Although Bradley and Cooper were vocal in their dislike of decadence,<sup>95</sup> there are many instances – as

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<sup>95</sup> On 17 April 1894, after seeing *The Yellow Book* for sale, Cooper wrote: 'We have been almost blinded by the glare of hell. [...] The window seemed to be gibbering, my eyes to be filled with incurable jaundice. [...] It is full of cleverness such as one expects to find in those who dwell below

with the occasional presence of New Woman tropes –where Michael Field uses decadent tropes for particular erotic and comic effect (‘The Mummy Invokes His Soul’, ‘Embalmmment’). They were certainly not above using decadence, of emulating ‘the criticism and parody manifested even in those most centrally involved in it’ (Thornton 1979: 22) to their own ends.

And yet, when all is said, it is Michael Field’s accomplishment as a poet of desire – or rather *desires*, manifold in their variety – which is surely the greatest achievement of the oeuvre. Although there are poems which can be said to express a romantic love between two women, there are also an equal number of poems which can be said to express same-sex desires between men, indeed, the authorial identity of Michael Field quite often complicates and deepens the reception of the desires which are being expressed and presented. What may be so often taken as a straightforward expression of desire is almost always more subversive, refracted through various layers and mirrors of shifting speakers and authorial identities. The desires which Michael Field projects are not purely at a male or female object, or between two women or two men, or even to one God; they at once encompass hetero, homo and bisexuality, classical and Catholic deities, even humble domestic dogs. At every stage, Bradley and Cooper, through Michael Field, un-house desire from all of its proscribed categories and let them all meet and mingle. Therefore sexual, maternal and religious desires are all intertwined and essentially akin, requiring similar languages, tropes and images to present them. When read as a whole, the collections of Arran and Isla Leigh, and all those of Michael Field are not concerned with one particular creed or mode of desire over another: there is no apparent urge to name or categorise, just to present desire in all of its ‘manifold’ possibilities.

Moreover, what is particularly interesting is the way in which these different desires are communicated throughout the oeuvre using specific images and tropes which shift in their significance and accumulate specific meanings as the collections move from the early paganism – through all the fluctuations of collaboration and aestheticism – to the later post conversion works. In the case of feminine desire, there is a movement away from the anonymous women in *The New Minnesinger* to the more archetypal personified figures of Venus and Psyche in *Bellerophon*. Then in *Long Ago* comes Sappho who is seen as representing a form of Everywoman figure,

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light & hope & love & aspiration. [...] Faugh! One must go to one’s Wordsworth & Shelley to be fumigated.’ (Field, Michael, BL. Add. MS. 46782, 1894, *fols.* 37v – 38r)

in the sense that she desires both men and women, she is a poet, a teacher, but also a mother. This close connection between motherhood and romantic love is forged in the Sappho figure and runs through the rest of the collections. The various Venuses and Madonnas who crop up in *Sight and Song* become emblematic of the suffering that women often experience at the hands of men, but also the power which they can gain through adverse experiences of heterosexual passion. By the time we reach Mary in the devotional works, although she is on the surface completely at variance with the previous female figures, she is in essence still exactly the same as them. The surface of the symbol may change, the spiritual allegiances may have shifted, but the same desires, the same concerns with female vulnerability and strength, the essential combination of mother-instincts and romantic passion, remain exactly the same, proving a steady consistency of vision throughout the poetic oeuvre.

The use of masculine symbols and figures is almost exactly the same, moving from the silent, shadowy figures of the Arran Leigh verses, to the more alluring and visible figures of Phaon, Alcaeus and Mars amongst others. However, there is initially a harshness here: the men are often indifferent to female passions, leaving the woman desirer frequently emotionally wounded or unfulfilled. The increasingly vulnerable adolescent figures – such as Sebastian and Christ – are more sympathetic to feminine experiences; the depictions of Christ and Sebastian are interchangeable. However, the significance of this later manifestation of masculine desire is that He is the son of Mary, the female paragon of desire, and can therefore connect and harmonise with her, reconciling all previous struggles between masculine and feminine forces. Furthermore, the masculine figure of Whym Chow – as Dionysus and Christ – is able to act as a conciliatory mediator between pagan and Christian as well as two separated desiring bodies.

The image of the flower, particularly the rose, is a powerful tool in the depiction of sexuality and desire. Right from the first poem of *The New Minnesinger* and through the early books of Michael Field the flower changes gradually from being a signifier of feminine sexuality to one of Divine love, signifying the suffering of Christ in his wounds, as well as the dead Chow as he lies crowned in his coffin. The link between these two uses is fascinating: the flower is often emblematic in Michael Field's verse of the female body – sometimes with genital overtones – and, as shown in Chapter 7, these remain in the poems which depict Christ's wounds, or where He and his mother are seen as lilies of one stem. With Michael Field, the

flower is a source of intense visual imagery which never loses its ability to evoke strong spiritual/erotic undertones. In connection with this is the trope of the bee which, in the earlier poems, is a powerful agent of sexuality, probing and penetrating the open flowers, but also carrying strong ambiguities of meaning, being both feminine and the active penetrator at the same time. By the time of the later devotional collections, the bees have become producers, manufacturers of wax which provides the paschal candles: a means of Holy connection. Therefore the once subversive sexual energies of the past can be transmuted in this way, with little trouble or anxiety, into mediators with the Divine.

The trope of dancing is a particularly important one and threads through each of the successive collections in the poetic oeuvre, from Sappho's young maidens; the arrested figures in Grand Master paintings; fauns and wine-treaders; maidens and maenads, right down to Salomé and the leaping Chow in the devotional collections. At all points, the dance is a charged symbol of self-containment, defiance of the collective social order, a powerful erotic and political act: it is one of the major recurring tropes in Michael Field's poetry which remains unchanging in this respect. The liberation found in the primal act of dancing mirrors the freeness of some of the poetic forms in *Underneath the Bough* and 'For That Moment Only'. The variations in line length and patterns of rhyme, the utilisation of condensed, sometimes stark imagery – not to mention the experimentations with prose poetics – often allied with the theme of dancing, display what could be termed a proto modernist fascination with the flux of the moment which required new modes and styles of aesthetic expression.

Indeed, the range of poetic forms in the Michael Field oeuvre is surprisingly diverse. Moreover, the use of traditional and more experimental structures is also consistently sophisticated. The works of Arran and Isla Leigh exhibit an identifiably Victorian formalism, which is inherent in the early collections of Michael Field, but then gradually moves into looser structures, particularly Imagistic experimentation and prose. The later collections from *Wild Honey* onwards, which uses the sonnet extensively, do move away from the more expansionist experiments of the early to mid nineties to more rigid structures, but the ability to play around with traditional patterns, to vary rhyme and scansion, remains to the end. Though the return to more traditional formalism can be said to evoke the movement back towards Michael Field's thematic and spiritual origins, it should also be remembered that the carefully

plotted appearance of the poetic oeuvre was a fluid work in progress. The unpublished prose poem experiments demonstrate quite vividly the different routes which Michael Field could have taken.

By utilising the same recurring tropes, developing them in places to accumulate meanings and express changes in spiritual temper, and to show the shifting attitude to the relations between the sexes, the poetic oeuvre of Michael Field is given a feeling of unity and a cumulative sense of development which is immensely entertaining and sophisticated in the myriad messages which it embodies. The legacy of this work upon succeeding female poets in the twentieth century is significant, but complicated by the fact that Michael Field so quickly fell from view. It is hard to prove any direct influence. However, as I have shown, the effects of certain poetic turns of phrase, of form and theme, can be felt strongly in the Imagist poetry of H.D. and Amy Lowell. As well as this, the presence, though spectral, of Michael Field can be felt in the collaborative love poetry of Sylvia Townsend Warner and Valentine Ackland, the playful, anarchic fantasies of Stevie Smith and the witty lugubriousness of Sylvia Plath. Indeed, when Anna Wickham asked in the poem 'Formalist': 'How can I pour the liquor of new days / In the old pipes of Rhyme' (Wickham 1916: 13, 6-7) she was repeating the concerns which had faced Bradley and Cooper when they had agonised over putting new modern poetic wine into old Elizabethan bottles. If direct influences on these twentieth century women poets cannot be proved, then Bradley and Cooper were certainly valuable in illuminating and prefiguring the voices and forms which would haunt women's poetry in the decades following their deaths.

The poetic oeuvre of Michael Field is unique for its time, and, I believe, within late nineteenth century literature for its sheer sophistication of structure and accumulated effects of form and imagery. As an intricate whole it has been overlooked. I have gone some way in this thesis in opening up the discussion of the oeuvre as an entity in its own right, as an identifiable – if accidental – sequence. Not since the neglect of Christina Rossetti for much of the twentieth century has a body of poetry of such variety and quality been ignored and misunderstood for so long. It can only be hoped that the wait which Robert Browning predicted back in the 1880s is now almost at an end and that the poetry will eventually be re-presented in its entirety to a new, more appreciative public.

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